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OR, THE RED RIDERS OF RAYON.

A Story of the Texan Frontier.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "THE FRESH OF FRISCO," "BRONZE
JACK," "CAPTAIN VOLCANO," "THE
STRANGER SPORT," "OVER-
LAND KIT," "TALBOT OF
CINNABAR," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A FRONTIER ARGUMENT.

"I WANT to go to El Paso."
"Why in blazes don't you go then? Who in
thunder is a-hindering you?"

And then the two men looked at each other,
eye to eye, for a moment.

It is of the little village of Las Cruces, situated
in the southern part of New Mexico, on
the bank of the Rio Grande del Norte, that we
write.

Las Cruces, at the time we introduce it to the
reader's notice, was an insignificant town, only
noted for being the spot where the Rio Grande

"TAKE THAT WITH THE COMPLIMENTS OF THE FRESH OF 'FRISCO'!"

stage line, running from Albuquerque to El Paso, changed horses.

It was the last station on the line until El Paso was reached.

We write of a time—not far distant—when the roar and scream of the Iron Horse did not wake the echoes along the banks of the Rio Grande as at present.

The stage ranch was on the outskirts of the village.

It was not an elaborate establishment, only consisting of an old-fashioned house, built of adobes, after the Mexican style, and a corral where the horses were kept.

Two men represented the stage company: Alexander Richardson, a big, burly, black-bearded fellow, who held the position of Express-agent, the boss of the establishment, and a short, thick-set, red-headed Irishman, Mike O'Donohue, the stockman.

The company hardly needed an agent at such an insignificant point as Las Cruces, for the town did not furnish business enough in a year to pay the agent's salary for a month, but being the changing station, a boss was necessary.

Alex Richardson was well-known along the line of the Rio Grande, and bore the reputation of being a tough customer, for he had an ugly disposition, and his size and weight made him a dangerous man to handle.

The agent sat in the main room of the ranch, with his chair tilted back against the wall, a short clay pipe in his mouth—the "dudeen" of the O'Donohue, to be exact—and his legs on the top of the small desk, which seemed to dignify the apartment with the title of office.

Richardson's meditations had been disturbed by the entrance of the man with whose speech we begin our tale.

The new-comer was a stranger, a muscular, well-built fellow, a little above the medium size, with a frank, open face, lit up by a pair of keen, gray-blue eyes, and fringed with yellow hair, which curled in little wispy ringlets close to his well-shaped head.

He was dressed in a complete suit of buckskin and wore a broad-brimmed slouch hat, pulled well down over his forehead.

His clothes were very much the worse for wear, and Richardson immediately jumped to the conclusion that he was a cowboy in "hard luck."

Two peculiarities about the man's suit we neglected to mention—his main garment was a sort of a shooting-jacket with deep pockets, instead of a hunting-shirt, and in place of the usual flannel shirt, the universal garment on the outskirts of civilization, he sported a "biled" article, elaborately frilled and ruffled, although it was now sadly soiled and in need of a laundress's care.

The stranger was a mild-spoken man, and he appeared astonished at the Express-agent's rude reply.

"I beg your pardon," he said, politely, "perhaps I have made a mistake. I took this to be the stage ranch."

"Right you are, young fellow, thar ain't the least doubt 'bout that; this ar' the stage ranch, and I am the agent, Alex Richardson."

"The coach for El Paso is due to-day?"

"You bet!"

"Well, I want a seat."

"What is the matter with the walking?" demanded Richardson, in so offensive a manner that, despite the evident desire of the other not to have any trouble, there came a glint of fire in his clear, resolute eyes.

But he was keeping a wonderful command over himself, for he replied with extra politeness:

"I don't generally walk when I have the ducats in my pocket to pay for riding."

"You won't ride in this hyer stage that comes in for El Paso to-day!" Richardson growled.

"Why not?"

"All full!"

An incredulous look appeared on the face of the applicant, and he shook his head.

The Express-agent scowled, took the pipe out of his mouth, removed his feet from the desk, and allowed his chair to resume its proper position.

Then placing the pipe upon the desk, he leaned his arms upon it and glared at the stranger.

"Pilgrim, I ain't a far-sighted man!" Richardson exclaimed, "but it seems to me as if you looked kinder doubtful, jest as if you didn't believe I was giving it to you straight when I said the coach was full, and hadn't no room for nobody else."

"My friend, your grammar really sets my teeth on edge," the other protested, with a wry face.

"I hate to have a man lie to me, even when he uses the best of language, but when he gives it to me in a way that would make Lindley Murray turn in his grave, it aggravates the offense."

The Express-agent was a man of violent passions, and had never been noted for restraining them in any way, and on this occasion he was quick to show his anger.

"What is that, you miserable hound?" he cried. "Do you dare to tell me to my teeth that I lie?"

"You bet!" replied the stranger, instantly. "That is my say-so. It's an impossibility for you to know whether the stage is full or not until the vehicle makes its appearance, for you have no means of knowing anything more about the matter than anybody else, and one thing is certain, the travel over the road has been light for the past two weeks for it has taken me just about that time to come down the river from Albuquerque and not a coach have I struck yet that was over half full."

"You're a stranger and so are not posted, or you would know better than to come fooling around a man like myself!" Alexander Richardson exclaimed, angrily.

"I want you to understand that when I say a coach is full it is full, though thar ain't a single passenger in it, and you had better vamose this ranch as soon as possible for nary chance will you get to ride to El Paso in our hearse to-day."

"Nary vamose!" cried the other, tersely. "And I am going to El Paso if I have to fight every man on the line from the superintendent down to the hostlers!"

"Look-a-hyer, I'm good enough for you!" the burly Express-agent cried, enraged beyond endurance by this bold defiance, and then he sprang to his feet and jumped at the stranger.

It was his calculation to bear the stranger to the floor by his superior weight, but in this he was woefully disappointed, for with the skill of a man who was used to this sort of thing the stranger retreated a couple of steps and planted a terrific "right-hander" plump between the eyes of the Express-agent which sent him spinning against the wall with a force which took his breath away for a moment.

Never in all the course of his rough Wild West experience had Alex Richardson received such a stroke.

It was a moment or two before the Express-agent could recover himself, and then, with an exclamation of rage, which sounded more like the growl of an animal than aught else, he rushed upon his opponent.

It was Richardson's idea that the terrible blow which he had received was only an accidental stroke, but he was doomed to be quickly undeceived, for although he was tolerably handy with his fists he was no match for his antagonist.

His fierce blows fell on the empty air; the other parried the strokes in the most adroit manner or else dodged them with the ease and grace of a dancing-master.

And then the moment that Alex Richardson, winded by his great exertions, paused to take breath, the agile adversary "hammered" him in a way he despised, ending the attack with another terrific right-hander which, catching the Express-agent on the jaw, floored him as if he had been shot.

It was fully five minutes before the Express-agent recovered sufficiently to sit up, and the moment he did so he reached for his revolver which was by his side in a holster, belted to his waist.

The stranger was on the watch for just such a movement, and before Alexander Richardson could get his weapon out a silver-mounted seven-shooter shone in the hand of the sport.

When Richardson came to the conclusion that it was no use for him to attempt to punish the impudent stranger with his fists and "went" for his "shooting iron," it was with the idea that his opponent was not armed, for no sign of a weapon could be seen; but the speedy manner in which he produced his "gun" from some secret hiding-place astonished him.

"Go slow, go slow!" the visitor continued. "Don't try to pull a gun on me, or I will bore you so quick that you will think you are struck by lightning!"

"This is a self-cocker, too, and awful light on the trigger, so don't go to cutting up any monkey shines, or else I might plug you before I knew it!"

Richardson was a whipped man and he had sense enough to see it.

"Well, I cave," he said, in a sulky sort of way, "but who in blazes are you, anyway?"

"My name is Jackson Blake. I am a sport from California, and out on the Pacific Slope I am sometimes called the Fresh of 'Frisco."

"Durned if the name don't fit ye!"

CHAPTER II.

HE RIDES.

THE Fresh laughed outright.

It was not the first time that such a remark had been made to him.

"Yes, I believe I was born to wear such a handle; anyway it has stuck to me closer than a brother for the last ten years."

"But touching this stage business: as I remarked at the beginning of this interesting interview, I want to go to El Paso."

"Every place in the coach is taken."

"How do you know?" demanded the sport.

Richardson hesitated for a moment and Jackson Blake immediately came to the conclusion that he was trying to think of some plausible lie.

"Well, since you are so anxious to know I'll tell you," the Express-agent observed. "One of

our men was at Fort Selden when the coach came in thar this morning and he brought me word that the hearse was full."

"He must have been well mounted to beat the coach so easily."

"Yes, his beast was a good one, and then he had half an hour's start, as Fort Selden is a meal station."

"Ah, yes, I see," and the Fresh nodded as if he was perfectly satisfied.

"I came from Fort Selden way myself this morning, and as there was a certain man whom I wanted to see in Las Cruces I hoofed it down so as to be able to get a talk with him and then take the stage. I reckon, though, I must have fallen asleep on the road, for I will swear that no man passed me on the road, either on foot or on the back of a nag."

"You must have made a mistake—your man must have had a balloon."

Richardson scowled at this pleasantry, but he had been too well whipped to provoke another quarrel.

"It don't make any difference whether you saw the man or not," he retorted, doggedly.

"He came through all the same. Mebbe he didn't come by the direct road. Now I come to think of it I believe he did say something about leaving the road to get a crack at a wolf he run across," the Express-agent added, his countenance lighting up as he saw a way out of the difficulty.

"Of course that explains the matter," the Fresh remarked, nodding his head as though he believed the yarn.

"And the man ain't here now, I suppose? He's gone on to El Paso, of course, so you can't produce him as a witness?"

"Yes, he has gone to El Paso," replied the other, rather sulkily, for he saw that the sport did not believe his statement.

"I was reckoning that it was that way. I am a regular Yankee at guessing. But, to come back to our mutton. I want a ticket to El Paso, and I will take my chances about getting a seat when the stage comes in."

Then the sport tossed a ten-dollar gold-piece on the desk behind which the Express-agent stood.

By this time Richardson had come to the conclusion that it was useless for him to contend with the man, and so he handed over the ticket and the change.

And just as he performed this action the coach came up.

The pair immediately hastened to the open air.

The stage came to a halt before the door, the Irishman set about changing the horses, and at the first glance it was apparent that the vehicle was far from being full, as it only contained three passengers, two young ladies and an old gentleman.

"Hello! your man wasn't well posted when he said the coach was so full that there wasn't any room for any more passengers," the Fresh observed, sarcastically.

"I reckon he must have had a heap of benzine on board, although he didn't act as if he was full, excepting that he told me not to book any passengers, for the stage couldn't take them," Richardson exclaimed, seeming to be very much astonished.

"Yes, I reckon he must have been loaded," the other remarked, apparently perfectly satisfied with the explanation, although there was a peculiar look in his eyes as he smiled at the Express-agent, which Richardson did not admire.

The agent advanced to the coach and opened the door for the sport to enter, a piece of politeness not common to such a man.

He nodded to the passengers, and said with a laugh, as though he considered the matter a good joke:

"I expected to see the coach crammed full of folks, for one of our men was along this morning, and said I mustn't book any passengers, and when this gentleman wanted to ride to El Paso, I told him thar wasn't any room for him, but I see thar's lots."

"Oho!" muttered the Fresh to himself, "for whom is this piece of information intended? Which one of these three does my bold Express-agent wish to inform, that he tried his best to keep me from riding, and that I wouldn't have it?"

"One of the two girls? Not likely! The old man, then? Ah, yes; he's the party. But why, in the name of all that is wonderful, does any one want to keep me from going in this hearse? What is the little game anyway?"

"Oh, yes," observed the male passenger, in answer to the superintendent's remark, "there's plenty of room, and has been all the way down."

By this time the horses were changed, for the O'Donohue was an expert at this sort of thing, and the driver's call of "all aboard!" warned the Fresh to take his place in the coach.

The young ladies sat on the back seat, the old gentleman on the front one, and Jackson Blake took a place by his side.

The swing seat in the center of the vehicle was not used, so there was plenty of room.

Away went the coach, and the Fresh, after his usual custom, fell to studying the faces of his companions.

As a general rule, on a trip of this kind in pleasant weather, the Fresh preferred a box seat, and rarely rode inside, but on the present occasion the presence of the two ladies was a magnet which our hero could not well resist, for young and beautiful girls are not common on the line of the frontier.

And both of these girls were beauties, fit to shine in any society.

One was a brunette, the other a blonde.

Both tall and queenly-looking, the brunette particularly so.

She was evidently the older of the pair, too. A tall, well-proportioned girl, with strongly-marked features, piercing eyes, black as a coal, and hair of the same hue, which curled in little ringlets and was cut short, boy fashion.

She was a decidedly masculine-looking girl, quite a contrast to the blonde, who was fully as beautiful as her companion with her great blue eyes, golden hair—so long in its magnificent luxuriance that she could easily sit upon it—regular features, clear red and white complexion, and soft, womanly appearance.

The blonde was a girl who would be sure to command admiration—the other to inspire love.

Both were dressed in becoming dark traveling suits, and from their dress and general bearing a close observer would be certain to conclude that they possessed the advantages which wealth and education give.

The other passenger, the elderly man, was plainly dressed, with a rather rugged look, and appeared like a stockman, but after "sizing him up," to use the Western lingo, our hero came to the conclusion that he was playing a part—that he was a sport in disguise, for his hands were too white and soft-looking for a man engaged in any rough, out-door occupation.

The readers who have followed the fortunes of Jackson Blake from the time that we first introduced him to the notice of the public in the tale called "The Fresh of 'Frisco," through his adventures as chronicled in "Bronze Jack," "Captain Volcano, the Man with the Red Revolvers," "California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred," and the "Stranger Sharp," will be apt to remember that this doughty sport was as curious as a woman, and equally as unable to keep out of mischief as the greatest gossip that ever infested a country village.

He was satisfied that there was something wrong. The determined effort which had been made to keep him from taking passage in the stage, and the suspicion which had come to him that the elderly man was not what he seemed, caused him to come to this belief, and with his usual impetuosity he determined to take a hand in the "fun," if there was going to be any.

As the reader, who has perused the other stories in which the Fresh of 'Frisco figured as a hero, will remember, it was this odd propensity to rush into scrapes—to bother himself with matters which did not concern him in the least—that had affixed to Jackson Blake the nickname of "the Fresh."

And now, on this occasion, no sooner did he suspect that some trickery was on foot than he at once set out to probe the matter to the bottom.

"Just enough of us to make a nice little party!" Jackson Blake exclaimed in his smoothest and pleasantest way, beaming on his companions.

"And just to think that if I had taken the word of that donkey of a station-agent, I should have missed this picnic altogether!"

"He swore the coach was full—said word had been sent to him to that effect. I knew the fellow wasn't telling the truth, for I walked from Fort Selden, and not a soul passed me on the road.

"Now, the question before the meeting is, why was this man so anxious to keep me from going in this coach? Is there some gum-game afoot—and if so, what is it?"

Jackson Blake had uttered his suspicions boldly, and while he spoke he kept a wary eye upon the others, paying more attention to the elderly man than to the two girls, for it was against him that his suspicions were directed.

He fancied that his blunt speaking might throw the other off his guard.

CHAPTER III.

THE STORY OF THE GANG.

The trick did not succeed, though, for nothing but the surprise which would naturally be excited by such an avowal was visible upon the face of the man.

He appeared to think the matter over for a few moments; then shook his head, and remarked:

"It is a riddle, and I guess I will have to give it up, for I don't see what possible object he could have had in wanting to keep you from going in the stage."

"Neither do I, and that is what bothers me," the Fresh observed.

"But I say, stranger, it seems to me that I have seen you somewhere before, and these two young ladies were with you, too, if I remember rightly," and the sport bowed politely to the girls.

"Oh, no, you are wrong—that is, about these ladies!" the man hastened to exclaim. "They

are strangers to me, and I never encountered them until I entered the coach.

"Well, I declare, that is strange!" and the Fresh assumed a puzzled air.

"I would have been willing to take my oath that I have met you three in company somewhere—Santa Fe was the place my mind was running on."

"I was never in Santa Fe in my life!" the other replied, promptly.

"And neither one of us has ever visited that city," observed the blonde.

"I declare I don't know what to make of it, for I usually pride myself on my memory. I felt sure I must have met you somewhere. Have you any objection to oblige me with your names? Mine is Jackson Blake, and originally I am from the Pacific Slope. 'Frisco is my hailing place, although I have been away from there so long that I don't know as I have any right to hark back so far."

The frank way in which the Fresh spoke tended to make the question less awkward than it otherwise would have been.

The blonde was the first to reply.

"I'm sure we haven't the least objection to allow our names to be known, although as far as I am concerned I do not remember to have ever met you," she said.

"My name is Isabel Escobedo and I am from Ysleta on the Rio Grande. This lady is my cousin, Miss Margaret Escobedo."

"I reckon I must be mistaken," Jackson Blake observed with a bow, "for I don't remember to have ever heard your names before."

"My name is Jackson—William Jackson," the elderly man remarked as he noticed the keen eyes of the Fresh turned inquiringly upon him.

"I have been running a stock ranch up in New Mexico but got shut of the concern to come down to try a new speculation in Texas; kinder got the Texas fever, you know. Some men from up my way came down to Texas and did so well that it encouraged me to come."

"I see, I see!" the Fresh exclaimed. "I reckon you will do right well down here. I am a little in the speculating game myself, and from all I have heard I should judge that this was a fine country for an enterprising man. But I am not getting at the point which I set out to reach, and that is what game did this stage-agent have in his mind when he tried to keep me from going in this coach."

"Oh, I guess it was a mistake," Jackson observed, carelessly.

"If I understand the matter correctly, the agent was informed by some man who came along in advance of the stage that it was all full."

"Yes, that was the yarn he told," the Fresh replied.

"It seems to me then that the explanation is simple enough. Either the man was playing a joke on him, or else the agent misunderstood what he said."

"It is possible, but not very probable," Jackson observed.

"I didn't explain the thing, but the agent and I had quite a tussle before I convinced him that I ought to have a ticket to ride in this trap, and it seems to me that if he hadn't some mighty strong reason he wouldn't have taken so much trouble about the matter."

"I notice that the ladies wear nice jewelry, and you look like a man who would be apt to be pretty well-heeled with the solid stuff; all you stockmen generally carry fat pocketbooks, and the idea came to me that if there was a gang of road-agents operating on this line they couldn't strike a softer snap than to stop a coach with only one man besides the driver to show fight—and drivers rarely fight, you know, particularly if the attack is well planned."

"They argue that they are paid to drive, not to fight."

"Of course, if there is any such game as this on foot, and the agent was in league with the game—there has been plenty of cases to my knowledge where the thing worked that way—then his attempt to prevent me from going in the coach could be accounted for. A healthy young man about my size, who would be apt to show fight and so make trouble in the family, is not the kind of hairpin the road-agent fellows are anxious to run up against."

"They always prefer a nice, easy snap."

"A stage like this with only one man is the sort of thing which suits them."

The others listened with interest to the sport's explanation, but from the expression upon the face of the elderly man was plain that he did not think Blake had hit upon the truth."

"Of course in such a country as this there isn't any telling what may happen," he remarked, "but, as far as my knowledge goes, there has not been any trouble with road-agents on this line—that is, not within the last three or four months, for I have been in this section for about that time, and I would surely have heard about it."

"There isn't any band making things lively around this section at the present time, then?" the Fresh asked.

"No, not to the north of El Paso; down along the Rio Grande, on the Mexican-Texan line, there is a party operating, I believe," the other replied.

"Aha, a Mexican party?"

"Yes, I believe so; I don't know much about them, for they have never come as far north as El Paso, although they are said to cover a vast extent of country—from where the Rio Cinchos runs into the Rio Grande to the Laguna de Patos, working both sides of the river."

"Ah, yes, that is the old game," the sport observed. "When the Texans get after them they cross the Rio Grande to Mexican soil, and when the Greasers make the country too hot to hold them, they dust back into Texas."

"That is the way they work it, I believe, and so they laugh at pursuit."

"The party is one of the biggest that has ever worked the river, as they term it down hyer, and they say they have successfully fought both the Mexican troops and the Texan Rangers, and although the Mexican soldiers are nothing to boast of, it takes mighty good men to get away with the Rangers."

"Yes, so I have heard."

"This gang is mighty well handled, I should judge, from what I have heard," Mr. Jackson continued.

"They are always disguised, so that it is utterly impossible for their victims to identify them, and they have adopted a name and a disguise apt to strike terror to the hearts of the men whom they assail."

"You don't say so! Now, upon my word this is getting real interesting!" the Fresh exclaimed, rubbing the palms of his hands briskly together.

"Do you know, ever since I was a boy I have always taken the greatest interest in these outlaw yarns."

"And these fellows are going at it the right way, too—they have got an awe-inspiring name, and a disguise to make a man's blood run cold—that is the way to do it. That is the way the game was always worked in the books which I used to read when I was a boy; but what do they call themselves, and what sort of a rig do they wear?"

"The band is known as the Red Riders of Rayon, and they are said to have their headquarters in the neighborhood of that place, which is a small village on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, the next town south of Ysleta."

"Well, that is just an immense name!" Jackson declared, evincing the most lively interest in the recital. "And from the fact that they are called the Red Riders, I suppose they wear red disguises."

"Yes, they wear red half-masks, and all the lower part of their faces is concealed by huge red beards."

"Splendid! Beats anything of that kind that I ever heard of, you bet!" the Fresh cried.

"On their heads they wear long-haired red wigs, and the upper part of their bodies is covered by rubber ponchos, painted red."

"Just a capital rig! I tell you, I would go a long way to see that gang!"

The other shook his head at this enthusiastic declaration.

"Most men who have encountered the Red Riders of Rayon cursed the ill-luck which had brought them in contact with the marauders," Mr. Jackson replied.

"Pretty tough customers, eh?"

"Yes, the old inhabitants of this region say they are the worst band that ever infested this section of country, for they are remorselessly cruel if they encounter any resistance. If their victims submit they do not harm them; but if they are unwise enough to show fight, then the Red Riders kill without mercy."

A little scream escaped from the lips of the two young ladies at this point; they had been listening to the conversation with fully as much attention as the Fresh of 'Frisco displayed.

"Oh, isn't it dreadful!" the blonde beauty exclaimed.

"Indeed, it fairly makes my blood run cold!" cried the blonde.

"There isn't the least bit of danger, ladies, I assure you," Mr. Jackson observed. "The Red Riders were never known to attack a coach on this line."

"And then if they did, this gentleman and myself would give them a good fight," the Fresh observed, in the most confident manner possible.

"Oh, no!" cried Mr. Jackson at once. "It would be worse than foolish to attempt to fight, and would only result in our being murdered in cold blood!"

"I am so frightened!" the blonde beauty cried. "Oh, sir, please change seats with me," she continued, addressing the stockman, "so that each one of us will have a gentleman to protect us."

"Certainly," Mr. Jackson responded.

Hardly was the transfer made when the coach abruptly halted.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RED RIDERS.

The moment the stage halted Miss Isabel Escobedo immediately became a prey to the most violent fear.

"Oh, heavens! the robbers are upon us!" she shrieked, and as she uttered the exclamation the girl threw her arms around the Fresh and held on to him as if her life depended upon it.

The result of this movement was that it virtually made Jackson Blake a prisoner, for he was unable to use his arms.

Suspecting that something was amiss when the coach halted so abruptly the Fresh reached for his weapons so as to be in readiness for a fight, but this unexpected movement of the girl disconcerted him.

"For Heaven's sake, miss, let go of me so I can have free use of my hands!" he expostulated.

"Oh, don't draw your weapons or we will all be murdered!" the girl cried, evidently in an agony of terror.

"If you will let go of me I will give them a fight, anyhow," the Fresh exclaimed.

"Let me beg of you not to attempt any useless resistance!" exclaimed the stockman, who had cast a shy glance out of the window.

"We are surrounded by the Red Riders and it would be the height of madness for us to attempt to beat them off."

Hardly had the words escaped his lips when the marauders showed themselves at both of the coach windows.

It was the Red Riders of Rayon beyond a doubt, for the strangers were dressed exactly as the stockman had described.

Long red hair, bushy red beards, red half-masks, covering the upper part of their faces, and red ponchos concealing their persons so that but little was visible above the tops of the big boots which they wore.

There were two of the Red Riders at each of the doors, one on horseback and one on foot.

The mounted men covered the passengers with rifles and the footmen threatened them with cocked revolvers.

"Give up your weapons and come out of that coach!" cried the horseman at the right-hand door of the stage, evidently the leader of the band.

"Submit quietly and no harm will come to you, but if any one is mad enough to show fight his blood will be upon his own head!"

"Oh, sir, have mercy upon us!" Isabel Escobedo cried, still clinging convulsively to the Fresh of 'Frisco, despite his efforts to free himself from her clutch.

Much as our hero would have enjoyed being embraced by so pretty a girl on any ordinary occasion, he would willingly have avoided it now.

As our readers who know the Fresh of old are aware, he was not the man to submit tamely to be robbed, although on the present occasion he had little to lose, yet to such a man as he was such a fact mattered not. He fought as easily for ten dollars as he would for a thousand.

Owing however to the wild terror of the Mexican girl he was placed in such a position that it was not possible for him to make a struggle, and so nothing was left for him to do but to submit as gracefully as possible.

Before he had a chance to speak though, the stockman hastened to assure the road-agents that the passenger had no thought of attempting any resistance.

"Glad to bear it," responded the outlaw chief in his rough, evidently disguised voice.

"It wouldn't do you any good and would only force us to be ugly, and we don't want to have any trouble if we can help it.

"We are the kind of men though who are not afraid to take the bull by the horns when it becomes necessary.

"Maybe you have heard of us if you are not strangers in these parts, for the Red Riders of Rayon are pretty well known all along the line of the Rio Grande from the Rio Conchos to the Pass of the North.

"We don't shed blood unless we are obliged to, but when resistance is offered we are as merciless as wolves when they close in on their prey.

"Oh, stop your blowing!" cried Jackson Blake unable to restrain himself. "You are a healthy set of cut-throats, of course—big chiefs, every mother's son of you when you have everything your own way, but I reckon you can run like jack rabbits when you come across a gang who have the nerve to stand up and give you a good fight!"

"For mercy's sake do not exasperate these outlaws or we will all be murdered!" the Mexican girl whispered hurriedly in the ear of the stockman.

"Do not mind this young man!" the old stockman exclaimed, also evidently much alarmed.

"Youth will be rash, you know, and he evidently is a stranger to your terrible band."

The dark eyes of the bandit chief sparkled with rage as he gazed upon the Fresh of 'Frisco. It was evident that he had not been accustomed to such bold speaking.

"When the Red Riders of Rayon turn their backs upon a foe it is because they are outnumbered ten to one!" the outlaw exclaimed, fiercely.

"Man to man, or even two or three to one we fear neither the Mexican soldiers nor the Texan

Rangers as has been amply proved by many a bloody fight.

"You are a stranger evidently and are not acquainted with the fearful reputation of our band, or else you would never permit your tongue to wag so freely, so we disdain to take advantage of our power to punish you, but have a care how you excite our anger further or we may make you repent your boldness."

"Brag is a good dog, but hold-fast is a better!" retorted the Fresh.

"But drive on with your go-cart. You will not make much out of me for I am about down to bed-rock now."

"Come out of the coach and give up your weapons and valuables as you alight!" commanded the outlaw chief.

He was at the right-hand door of the stage, as we have said, and as the Fresh of 'Frisco sat by this door he was the first to get out.

The Mexican girl, Isabel Escobedo, followed him immediately, and on the ground clung tightly to him as though she fancied that by so doing she gained protection.

Jackson Blake was decidedly annoyed by the girl's persistency in this matter, for he had made up his mind that when he got to the ground and came to surrendering his weapons, he would bestow the contents of his revolvers upon the road-agents instead of the weapons themselves.

Being self cockers there would not be any difficulty in discharging them before the bandits would have an idea of the game he was going to play, and such was the marvelous confidence of the Fresh of 'Frisco that he hadn't the least doubt he could whip the road-agents single-handed, although when he got a good look at the party, after getting down from the stage, he saw there were six of them.

The frightened girl clung to him in such a manner, though, that it was impossible for him to put his plan in execution, and so he was obliged to surrender his weapons, which he did with the utmost reluctance, for they were as good a pair of tools as ever a gunsmith handled.

"Say, pards, these revolvers of mine are old friends, and I hate like thunder to part with them," he remarked as he yielded the seven-shooters into the hands of the masked outlaw, who was on foot.

"I don't suppose you care particularly about keeping them, and if you haven't any objections I should like to be able to redeem them."

"Well, I guess that matter can be arranged," the outlaw chief replied.

"I am not well-heeled now, and, of course, I will be worse off when you get through with me, but after getting into El Paso the chances are big that I shall strike a lead, and so be able to redeem my tools.

"If you can arrange it so that the weapons can be sent to some party there, where, by paying the cash, I can get them, I shall be much obliged."

"Oh, I reckon we can fix the thing. How much will you give for the tools?" asked the road-agent leader, surveying the revolvers with a critical eye.

"Suppose you put the price on them; make the figure as low as you can, for you must take into consideration the fact that after I get out of your clutches I will be broke and compelled to take a fresh start."

"Oh, your friends in El Paso will help you along."

"Friends!" cried Jackson Blake, "why, I don't know a man in the town."

"Some women then, maybe," the outlaw chief remarked, jeeringly.

"Neither man nor woman—not a soul do I know, man, woman, or child."

"How do you propose to raise money, then?" asked the marauder, evidently not knowing exactly what to make of the Fresh.

"Well, I play a tolerably good game of poker and as a rule manage to get along pretty well."

"Now, if you are much at flipping the paste-boards, I should be glad to 'go' you, to see whether you take my wealth, or I go free."

"Oh, no," the outlaw chief replied, immediately. "We have a sure thing now, and we don't propose to take any chances, so hand over your ducats."

"Well, as it is your say-so, I reckon I will have to come up to the scratch, although it comes like pulling teeth."

Then the Fresh produced a buckskin bag which he handed to the road-agent.

It contained just twenty-one dollars, as the dismounted Red Rider announced, after counting the money.

"You ain't well-heeled, for a fact!" the outlaw chief declared, evidently disappointed at the smallness of the booty.

"Are you sure that you haven't got some more wealth hidden away in your clothes somewhere?"

"You can search me if you like."

"We will do that presently. Tie his hands."

The dismounted outlaw produced a lariat and, despite Jackson Blake's protest, bound his wrists securely together.

"And in regard to the revolvers, I think fifty dollars will be about the figure. After you get in El Paso and raise the money, call upon the

old Jew, Hadad Solomons, and tell him you will give fifty dollars for a pair of revolvers like these—describe them, you know, and tell him the Red Riders have them. He has his peddlers out through the lower country between El Paso and Chihuahua, and by means of one of them can get word to us."

"All right, though you have put a terrible steep price on the tools under the circumstances," the Fresh remarked.

"We must make hay while the sun shines," the other retorted.

"You are a pretty smart fellow, I think, and the chances are big that we will not be able to get another whack at you."

"You will not if I have anything to say about the matter!" the Fresh remarked.

By this time the two road-agents, who had been on the other side of the coach, came around the vehicle and joined the group, all the passengers having left the stage.

The two mounted outlaws—the men in the road ahead, who had suddenly made their appearance and with their leveled rifles brought the stage to a halt—retained their position.

"Take this man over to the bushes yonder and search him," commanded the outlaw chief, when the other two of his gang joined the group.

The order was immediately obeyed, but the search was a fruitless one.

No money-belt or secret pocket rewarded the search.

While this was going on, the stockman was compelled to deliver his wealth, but when the ladies drew forth their pocketbooks, the outlaw chief, with a shake of his head remarked:

"Oh, no, ladies, we shall not trouble you; the Red Riders do not make war upon women. You can retain both your money and your trinkets, and are at liberty to resume your places in the stage."

"Thank you, sir," responded Isabel, and her cousin re-echoed the speech.

The two ladies and Mr. Jackson resumed their seats.

"Drive on!" commanded the outlaw chief.

The Red Riders in the trail withdrew to one side, and on went the coach, much to the disgust of our hero, the Fresh of 'Frisco, who did not at all relish being left behind.

"Hallo! hallo! this isn't exactly a square deal!" he cried.

"What is the matter with you?" one of the marauders who had charge of the prisoner cried.

"The walking is extra good between hyer and El Paso!"

And then both of the men laughed heartily, as though they considered it a good joke.

CHAPTER V.

A PROPOSITION.

OUR hero was not a man who was easily disengaged, and the prospect of walking to his destination had no terrors for his soul.

"Oh, well, I'll walk!" he exclaimed, and the tone in which he spoke, just as though he had free choice in the matter, caused his guards to roar with laughter again.

"Blamed if you ain't an out-and-outer!" cried one of the ruffians.

"Yes, a reg'lar plum bird on a lily root!" exclaimed the other.

"I am the champion, and no mistake!" the Fresh asserted, "and you two galoots can thank your lucky stars that you got the chance to be introduced to such a man as I am."

"Oh, yes, in course!" and then the brigands laughed again.

"Well, am I at liberty to depart now?"

"I reckon not. The captain didn't say as how you was to be let go, and, I 'spose, we are to hold on to you until we hear from him."

"Yes, I reckon that is our leetle game," observed the second marauder.

The Fresh and his guards had the field to themselves now, for as soon as the coach got in motion, the horsemen all rode off to the eastward.

"I s'pose we might as well sit down and make ourselves comfortable," the first ruffian observed, stretching himself, leisurely, upon the ground.

"Oh, yes, there isn't anything like taking it easy," remarked the other, following the example of the first.

"Well, I must say that you two are about as sensible men as I have met in a dog's age," the Fresh remarked, also seating himself.

"Now, this is what I call real comfortable—a regular picnic, and no mistake!"

"Say, you gentle galoots, I have a deck of cards in my pocket; suppose you just loosen this lashing around my wrists, so I can have the use of my hands, and we will have a nice little quiet game of poker."

"Ho, ho, ho! if that ain't an idee!" cried the first ruffian.

"Mighty sensible one," observed the other Red Rider, who happened to be an inveterate gambler.

"But I say, pard, you are down to the bed-rock, and thar ain't any use of playing poker without thar is some money up to make the game interesting."

"Of course there isn't the least doubt about

that; poker without the solid stuff wouldn't be in the least bit attractive.

"But if I haven't got money I have a buck-skin suit here which I would be willing to stake on the game."

"It isn't the best-looking rig along the Rio Rio Grande, but it is like a singed cat, a deal better than it appears. I tell you, pard, there is a heap of service yet in this suit, and I reckon any Jew in El Paso would be glad to give a 'saw-buck' for it."

"Well, I don't know about that; them durned old skinflints are never willing to give anywhere near what a thing is worth," the first ruffian observed. "And ten dollars is a heap of money."

"But I say, pard, much as I would like to take a hack at you with the keerds, I wouldn't go for to take the responsibility of loosening that ar' lariat. The captain is a terror, he is, and, mebbe, he wouldn't like it."

"I don't see what particular objection there can be," the Fresh observed in his careless, jolly, off-hand way, which was so apt to win confidence.

"You have my weapons—or rather your captain has, and there are two of you, fully armed, so there isn't the least danger that I, a helpless prisoner, would be able to escape."

"I'm just dying too to get a chance to skin you galoots out of your eye-teeth at poker."

This bold statement immediately excited the second ruffian, who was such a slave to gambling that he would rather play than eat.

"Oh, you skin me! Oh, no, not much!" he cried, defiantly.

"Why, if you had a million dollars I'd beat you out of it so quick that it would make your head swim!"

"Ah, now, you are only talking!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"You don't dare to meet me in a good, square game of poker. By the holy smoke I would clean you out in no time, and that is the kind of man I am!"

"I say, pard, whar's the harm if we jes' loosen that ar' lariat a leetle?" the gambler asked, eager for the fray.

"Oh, no, it would be as much as our lives are worth if the captain should hear of it," responded the other.

"Yes, but he isn't likely to hear of it," urged the Fresh.

"Of course, I sha'n't give it away, and you two galoots are not likely to do it."

"I don't see no harm inter the thing," the second ruffian remarked.

But the first man was firm in his opposition, and so the project was given up, much to the disgust and disappointment of the Fresh.

As the reader has probably surmised, it was not from any desire to pass the time away, or to enrich himself at the expense of the outlaws that induced our hero to propose a little poker game.

His sole object was to get them to loosen the lariat which bound his wrists so tightly together.

As long as that remained he was helpless, but if he could only succeed in getting the use of his hands again he had not the least doubt he would be able to get the best of the two ruffians who guarded him.

He felt sure that the outlaw chief had not yet got through with him, for with his usual sharpness of vision, he had noticed a brief exchange of words between the captain of the Red Riders and the stockman, just before Jackson entered the stage, and from the peculiar way in which the two men glanced in his direction he came to the conclusion that the conversation was in regard to himself.

He felt perfectly sure that Jackson was a fraud—that he was not a stockman at all, but one of the Red Riders, who assumed to be a stranger in order to carry out the outlaw's plans.

So he had made a strenuous effort to get the use of his hands, but the caution of the first outlaw baffled him.

For about an hour the three remained quiet in the shelter of the clump of bushes, the outlaws getting out their pipes and amusing themselves with a smoke, while the Fresh racked his brain to devise some way of escaping from the snare into which he had fallen.

But any attempt was hopeless as long as his guards were wide awake and on the alert as at present.

Time passed slowly away, but the long wait was at last brought to an end by the appearance of the Red Riders, three in number, mounted, and making directly for the clump of bushes.

The outlaws rose to their feet, and the Fresh followed their example.

"Darned if I ain't glad ther captain's come!" observed the first ruffian, and the other nodded assent.

The horsemen came within about a hundred yards of where the footmen stood, then two of them halted, while the third, who was the outlaw chief, rode toward the group.

He reined his horse in at their side and bade the two guards join their fellows on the plain as he had something to say to the captive.

The pair obeyed without a word, and when they were beyond earshot, the outlaw leader,

fixing his piercing eyes upon Jackson Blake, remarked:

"Young man, you are in a pretty tight place."

"Tell me something that I don't know," responded the Fresh, with his usual coolness, immediately.

"You take the matter mighty easy."

"Would it do me any good to take it any other way?"

"No, I don't know as it would. You are sensible as far as that goes," the outlaw chief observed, thoughtfully.

"Who are you, anyway?"

"My name is Jackson Blake, I am a sport from the Pacific slope, and out there the boys used to call me the Fresh of 'Frisco, as it was their opinion that salt wouldn't save me."

"I shouldn't be surprised if they were about right," responded the bandit.

"You seem to be a pretty good man; how would you like to join my band?"

"Well, I don't know," the Fresh replied, in a reflective way. "I have never done anything in that line. I suppose you make a good thing of it, but in the long run a bullet, or the hangman's rope is pretty sure to spoil the business."

CHAPTER VI.

THE DIVISION.

FROM the angry flash which came from the eyes of the masked man it was plain that he did not relish the candid speech of the sport.

"Well, I reckon there is always big risks in a big game."

"You are about right there."

"What do you think; will you join our band?"

"Well, I don't know but what I will be willing to risk it," the sport replied. "There isn't any other opening for me just at present, and, I suppose, there is big money in your scheme, even if there is big risk."

"Oh, yes, we generally do pretty well. By the way, are you a particular friend of the two ladies in the coach?"

"No, I can't say that I am; I can hardly be called an acquaintance, as I never met either one of them until I entered the stage."

"And the elderly man who looked like a stockman?"

"He is a stranger to me also."

"Did you learn the name of the ladies?"

Quickly came the thought to the Fresh—was it wise for him to admit that he possessed the knowledge? But then what harm could there possibly be in admitting it?

Besides, if the stockman, Jackson, was in league with the Red Riders, as our hero suspected, the fact that he was acquainted with the names of the ladies was probably known to the outlaw chief and by denying the possession of the knowledge he would get himself in trouble.

These thoughts passed like a flash through the mind of the sport, so that he only seemed to hesitate for a moment before replying, and this he adroitly accounted for.

"I was just trying to see if I could recall the names," he said. "I am not a great hand at any foreign lingo, but I think I have got this thing all right and straight. The tall one is Isabel and the blonde one Margaret and the rest of their handle, Escobedo."

As he spoke the Fresh was watching intently the eyes of the outlaw captain, shining through the holes of the mask, and he fancied that they gleamed in anger as his words fell upon the ears of the unknown.

"Escobedo!" repeated the outlaw chief, slowly; "Escobedo! the name seems familiar to me, as I presume it is to you."

"Oh, no, I never heard it before."

"But as it is rather a hard name you will not be likely to forget it!" the stranger asked, questioningly, and again the angry gleam shone in the outlaw's dark eyes.

This speech caused the Fresh to come to the conclusion that the Red Rider chief would be glad if the names of the ladies should not linger in his memory, so, in a careless way, he made answer:

"Well, the odds are big that if you should tackle me in a week on the subject that I wouldn't be able to tell you what the name was. I haven't a very good head for names, anyway."

"Oh, you are doing yourself a great injustice by that statement, I am sure," and the outlaw leader spoke in such a peculiar fashion, that the Fresh was immediately reminded of the paw of an angry cat.

"Aha, I have managed to put my foot into it in some way," he murmured under his breath.

But the Fresh, with that wonderful self-command over his features which he possessed in such a great degree, did not allow his face to betray the suspicion which was in his mind, but answered in the most cheerful manner.

"It is just as I tell you; I am death on faces, but names don't seem to stick much in my memory."

"It is a pity," the Red Rider chief remarked, with a decided tinge of sarcasm in his tone. "Perhaps in time you will improve in this respect."

"Yes, I hope so," our hero answered, just as

if he believed the speaker was in earnest, "not that it makes much difference though as far as I can see."

"Well, you are willing then to join our band?"

"Oh, yes, I will try it for a while, just for greens."

"Perhaps you think you can play some trick on us," the outlaw chief suggested.

"A trick?"

"Yes, you will join the Red Riders simply to be able to betray them to the authorities upon the first opportunity."

"Oh, no, that wouldn't be a safe game for me to play!" our hero protested. "And then, I reckon, you will not give me much chance to play any roots upon you until you find out whether I can be trusted or not."

"You are quite right about that; and then too the vengeance we execute upon traitors is something horrible—but you need not be alarmed, for I feel sure there is not the slightest danger that you will ever attempt to betray the Red Riders of Rayon."

"Oh, you can bet on that, I reckon!" the Fresh cried, cheerfully, and yet his quick ears had detected that there was a double meaning to the speech—a hidden menace.

"Well, take care of yourself until I see you again; my men will look after you."

And then, with a wave of his hand as a farewell salute, the outlaw chief rode off and joined his men upon the prairie.

The Fresh watched him with keen interest.

"That fellow is a Mexican I should judge from his eyes, or else a half Mexican, for I would be willing to take my oath that there is some of the durned mongrel blood in him, and like all his race treachery comes natural to him."

"He is up to some gum-game now; I don't know what it is, of course, but I can feel it in my bones that he doesn't mean to play fair with me."

"I must be on my guard, although the way things are fixed he has me foul and I can't do much to help myself, but while there is life there is hope! I have been in a good many tight places in my time and lived to tell about them, and there isn't really any reason why I should not succeed in crawling out of this scrape. Any way, I will make a good try for it, and mortal man can do no more."

The outlaw chief halted when he reached the Red Riders and entered into conversation with them.

The sport, watching the party with all his senses keenly on the alert, came to the conclusion that the conversation was in regard to himself, for he noticed that the attention of the group was directed to him every now and then.

The chief seemed to say something which did not meet with the approbation of the two men who were on foot, for they appeared to be protesting.

The Red Rider leader cut short the discussion though he shook his clinched fist in the faces of the other with an emphatic nod in the direction of the Fresh as he did so, and then, with the other horsemen, rode off, heading down the river toward El Paso.

The dismounted men came slowly toward the sport, and his apprehension that something was amiss increased as he saw the fierce expression in their eyes.

"I reckon they are bringing me my death-warrant," the Fresh muttered to himself, as the ruffians approached. "But, although I am a prisoner and not able to fight for my life in a good, square, open way, yet I'll be hanged if I am going to allow myself to be slaughtered like a blind puppy."

"As I heard the old Frenchman say in the play once when I took in the theater in St. Louis, 'When the lion's skin falls short, eke it out with the fox's.'

"I reckon the lion's skin is pretty durned scanty this rifle, and I'll have to throw in about a dozen foxes' skins to make up for it."

When the ruffians came within about ten yards of the sport, they halted and surveyed him in an extremely peculiar manner, just as if they had a disagreeable communication to make and were uncertain how to go about it.

The Fresh, with his usual readiness, proceeded to help them out of the difficulty.

"Say, it looks to me as if you two galoots had something to say to me and didn't exactly know how to spit it out!" the sport exclaimed.

The bravoes looked at each other, evidently completely taken by surprise by this unexpected speech.

"You needn't worry your brains about the matter, but rip it out, anyway; I reckon I can stand it if you can, although I guess you are not bringing me good news."

"Well, that's a sure enough fact," responded the first ruffian.

"And I'm durned sorry for it, too," added the other.

The tone of voice in which the two spoke decidedly impressed the sport.

He looked from one to the other, and then said:

"I reckon you two have the job of wiping me out."

"You are right thar!" replied the first ruffian, "and although I must say that it is a job which goes awfully ag'in' my grain, yet it must be done."

"The captain has changed his mind, then," the Fresh remarked, taking the news with a coolness which won the admiration of the desperadoes.

"He just made me an offer to join your band, and I had an idea that everything was lovely and the goose hung particularly high."

"Tain't that way, pard; the captain thinks you are a dangerous man. You know too much 'bout us and our affairs, and we have got to wipe you out, or else, mebbe, you would work it so that we would be wiped out."

"We hate to do it, you know," chimed in the other desperado; "but orders are orders, you see. We have got to carry out the captain's commands, or else he would go for us."

"Certainly—of course—I understand that. I am durned sorry that the rifle is working this way; but, 'what can't be cured must be endured,'" the sport remarked, not betraying the least fear.

"And I say, boys," he added, "since the time has come for me to pass in my checks, there's a little secret that I suppose I had better confide to you."

"A secret?" cried the first ruffian, and both, with the glare of speculation in their eyes, came nearer to the sport.

"Yes, a secret concerning the richest gold lead that was ever struck in New Mexico—up in the Zuni region. Sewed up in the lining of my coat is a paper which describes the spot, and if you will agree to send a fair share of the money to my old father in the East, I will put you on the track."

"The directions are written so durned queer that any one might read them, and not be able to make out how to get at the mine, but I can explain the thing so you can go right straight to the spot."

"Tis here mine was what was bringing me to El Paso. I ran across it with a couple of pards about a month ago, but the red-skins got after us and we had to run for our lives.

"Both of my pards were wiped out, I alone escaped, and my little game was to get some solid men in El Paso to go in with me, raise a force big enough to fight the red-skies and go for the mine."

The Fresh seemed to speak with the accent of truth itself and neither one of the desperadoes had the least doubt in regard to the tale.

The story of the secret mine is one of the oldest of the wild western romances and never fails to find plenty of believers.

A man is apt to believe that which he wishes to believe.

"Well, pard, we'll do the squar' thing with yer old dad if you will put us on the right track," the first ruffian remarked.

"Yes, and you might as well let us make some money out of the thing, seeing as how you won't be able to get a whack at it yourself," added the other.

"Of course, that is my idea, and then, I want the old man to stand some show."

"Oh, we'll do the square thing by him!" exclaimed the first ruffian.

"You bet!" cried the second.

"You can afford to be liberal for this mine is rich enough to make the fortunes of a dozen men!" the sport asserted.

"I tell you, pards, when you begin to rake the gold out you will not have to take a back seat for any man west of the Mississippi! It is the biggest kind of a strike!"

"Just rip open the lining of my coat here in the left breast. If you feel, I guess you can make out the paper, although it isn't large."

The ruffians in their eagerness came close to the captive—no suspicions in their minds.

CHAPTER VII.

AN ASTONISHED PAIR.

THIS was the opportunity which the Fresh sought, and for which he had so carefully planned.

The weapons of the Red Riders were in their belts, for they hadn't the least thought that the prisoner meditated anything so desperate as an attempt to escape from the fate to which he had been doomed, and they came up to him without the least suspicion.

"I'll hold my hands up out of the way so you will be able to get at my coat," the sport observed, elevating his bound wrists up over his head as he spoke.

The action was so natural that the suspicions of the captors was not aroused.

The Fresh was in a position though to deal a terrible blow, and he was quick to improve the advantage.

With all the strength of his powerful muscles he dashed his clinched fists full in the face of the first desperado, felling him headlong to the ground, then with a dextrous trick he doubled up the second ruffian, sending him howling to the earth, saying as he did so: "Take that with the compliments of the Fresh of 'Frisco!"

The terrific strain loosened the lashings around

his wrists a little, so he was able to have, in a slight degree, the use of his hands, although the lariat held so well that he could not free himself with all his desperate exertions.

His hands were so he could manage a pistol, though, and quickly he possessed himself of one from the belt of the ruffian whom he had half-stunned by the terrible blow in the face.

The revolver secured, the great difficulty was to raise the hammer in his fettered condition; but there's an old adage which says, "fortune favors the brave," and in this case it certainly seemed as if the saying was true, for the weapon proved to be a double-acting one—a self-cocker.

The moment the Fresh made this discovery, he felt the victory was won.

The ruffian, whom he had temporarily disabled by a kick, reached for his weapon the moment he recovered sufficiently from the effects of his injury to be able to do so, but by this time the sport was ready for him, and as the desperado drew his pistol, with a quick, snapshot the Fresh closed his mortal account.

Down went the man, all in a heap, and at the same moment, the other desperado, having come to his senses, jumped to his feet, plucking forth his remaining revolver as he did so.

But the Fresh was ready for him, and before the man could take aim, the crack of the sport's pistol sounded on the air.

Well had the Fresh been named the Californian Dead-Shot, for his second bullet was as fatal as the first, and the ruffian was hurried into eternity without a chance to speak a parting word.

The fight was ended, and with his customary luck, the sport proved the winner.

"So far, so good!" he exclaimed; "these two scoundrels have escaped the hangman's rope, but now I must hurry up and get clear of this lariat, for the rest of the gang may make their appearance at any moment."

It did not take our hero long to accomplish this feat.

He plucked a bowie-knife from the belt of the nearest ruffian, sat down, placed the handle between his knees, and by sawing the lariat against the edge of the blade soon severed it.

"Aha, this is something like!" he cried in triumph, as he rose to his feet, the lariat dropping to the ground.

"Now, then, with the aid of the weapons of these dead desperadoes, I fancy I will be able to fight all the Red Rider gang if they should happen to return."

And acting on this idea, he proceeded to help himself to the weapons of the dead men.

He took the belt from one of them and buckled it around his waist, adjusting the holsters upon it so as to accommodate all four of the revolvers and also shoved the eight-inch bowie-knife through the belt.

"By the way, I need some cartridges," he observed, "and as these tools are all of the same caliber, one box will do for the whole caboodle."

"And let me see, isn't that old saying, 'to the victor belongs the spoils' a pretty good one, and doesn't it fit in here?"

"Ain't I justified in going for these galoots, and stripping them of their wealth, seeing that they went for me to the queen's taste?"

"Well, I reckon that is both law and gospel, and I am the man to put it through for all it is worth."

The dead desperadoes did not pan out though as well as the Fresh had expected, for the pair only had seven dollars between them, the first ruffian six silver dollars and the gambler four "two-bit" pieces, but he got two boxes of cartridges.

"Oho! I sha'n't be likely to break my back carrying this amount of silver!" the Fresh observed, considerably disappointed by the smallness of the find.

"The galoots got a good deal more coin than this out of me," he continued. "So I must reckon that the Red Riders of Rayon are still in my debt, and I will be hanged if I don't force them to a settlement before I leave this region."

"And they have got the best of me too in the weapon swap, for I wouldn't give my pair of beautiful barkers for a dozen of these common-place tools!"

"Beggars mustn't be choosers though, and I suppose I ought not to complain, particularly when it is considered that if this Red Rider chief had succeeded in his plan I would be in the happy hunting-grounds by this time."

"I owe the fellow one for that, and I will not rest content until the account is squared, either!"

This was no empty boast, as the reader who has followed the Fresh of 'Frisco through his varied adventures, can easily understand.

After possessing himself of the spoils the sport took a look at the faces of the dead men; just out of pure curiosity for he had no idea that he knew either of the two.

One was a common, ordinary-looking fellow, such as are to be seen by the score in all the frontier towns; the second, by his dark face and jet-black hair, betrayed his Mexican origin, but there wasn't anything upon the person of either to show who they were.

"Well, I must be getting out of this!" the

Fresh exclaimed, "or else the Red Riders and I may run afoul of each other!"

By this time the sun was beginning to get low in the western skies, and as our hero noticed this fact the thought came to him that the coming on of the night would be a decided advantage, for darkness would shield him from the outlaws.

He proceeded to the trail and headed down the river toward El Paso.

The gloom thickened, but there was a new moon, rising early, and the night was far from being dark.

As nearly as the Fresh could calculate he was twenty, or twenty-five miles, from his destination—considerable of a walk even for a man of his fine muscular powers, but he trudged manfully on, keeping his ears open for the approach of any horsemen, for he understood that they were far more likely to prove enemies than friends.

Not a soul did he encounter though, but about ten o'clock he came to a solitary cabin through the chinks of which gleamed a light.

"Perhaps I can get accommodation here for the night, and then go on fresh in the morning, for although I am Fresh by name, I feel anything but fresh just now."

Our hero judged that he had covered some sixteen miles since starting on his tramp and so could not be far from El Paso.

The cabin was the home of a half-breed sheep-herder, a rather dull fellow, but quite ready to make the stranger comfortable for the night.

Upon inquiring, the Fresh found that he was within six miles of El Paso.

The half-breed set out a frugal repast, to which the traveler did full justice, and in the course of the conversation during the meal, the Fresh spoke in a guarded way of the marauders who called themselves the Red Riders of Rayon.

But the half-breed had never heard of such a band, so it was plain to our hero that the stockman's statement in regard to the Red Riders confining their raids to the country below El Paso, was correct.

Why, then, had this swoop on the stage been made?

The stockman and himself alone had suffered, and if Jackson was a confederate, as the Fresh believed, the outlaws had been poorly paid for their trouble.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DRIVER IS AMAZED.

OUR hero enjoyed a good night's rest, and was up betimes in the morning.

The sheep-herder shared his breakfast with the guest and then the Fresh set out.

He tried to pay the half-breed for his trouble, but the man drew his ragged serape around him with the air of an emperor and absolutely refused to accept a penny, so, with a hearty hand-shake, our hero went on his way.

He had little dread now of encountering the outlaws, as he reasoned that they would not be apt to dare to venture so near to El Paso, particularly after their attack on the stage on the preceding day.

He went on for about an hour, and was beginning to look ahead for some signs of the town, when a stage-coach came in view.

It made its appearance around an abrupt bend in the road, and the driver was within twenty feet of the sport before he had any idea of the Fresh's presence.

It was the same coach and the same driver that the marauders had stopped.

The surprise of the man was wonderful.

The Fresh had halted when the coach appeared, standing stock-still in the road, and the driver grew white in the face, pulling the horses up so abruptly that they were forced back upon their haunches.

A maneuver which caused the two passengers—both men—who were in the coach to thrust their heads out of the windows in great alarm.

The Fresh was amazed at the consternation so plainly exhibited upon the face of the driver, and for which he could not account.

"Hallo, what's the matter with you?" the sport asked.

The sound of the voice seemed to recall the driver to himself.

"Curse me, if you ain't alive!" he cried in a tone of profound wonder.

"Of course I am alive! Why, man, what cranky idea have you got in your head? Is it a common thing for dead men to walk the trails down in this section, particularly by daylight?"

"Well, no, I reckon it ain't," the driver replied, by this time becoming himself again, but surveying the sport with a puzzled glance.

"And I say, what on earth put into your head that I was dead?" the Fresh asked.

"Well, I dunno; nothing as I knows on," the other replied, evidently confused by the question.

"Oh, yes, there was something. Why do you try to creep out of it in that lame way?" the sport exclaimed.

"I suppose that on account of my being carried off by that party you thought it would be the end of me."

"Yes, yes, I reckon so," the Jehu replied, evidently much confused by something.

"But there's many a slip between the cup and the lip, and, as you can plainly see, I am worth a dozen dead men!"

"Well, it looks like it."

"The fellows did intend to kill me—the two men on foot, you know?"

The driver nodded.

"But I knew a trick worth two of that, and so I laid *them* out."

"Oh, get out! you are only blowing now!" the other exclaimed.

"It's a fact, for sure!" the Fresh protested. "Just look here—look at the weapons that I took from them!" And as he spoke, the Fresh raised the skirts of his coat and displayed the four revolvers belted to his waist.

A blank look of dismay passed rapidly across the face of the driver, which was succeeded by a scowl, which, however, he banished as quickly as possible.

Not quickly enough, though, to escape the keen eyes of the Californian sport who was on the watch for just such a thing.

"Aha! it is as I thought!" the Fresh muttered to himself, "this driver is in league with the scoundrels. The Express-agent at Las Cruces is a confederate, too."

"In the name of wonder how many pards have these Red Riders got on this one stage line?"

"Well, I wouldn't have believed it possible," the driver remarked, slowly, after a pause, during which he had evidently been endeavoring to collect his thoughts.

"Oh, it is a sure enough thing! I am used to little troubles of this kind," the sport replied, with the most careless air imaginable.

"I don't know whether the authorities have offered any reward for the killing off of these marauders or not, but if they have I think I am just about the man to take the money. If the folks down here are ready to talk business, I will take a contract to clean out the whole gang!"

Again there was a gleam of rage in the dull eyes of the stage-driver, although he did his best to disguise his feelings, but the evidence of wrath did not escape the keen eyes of the Fresh, who was on the watch as earnestly as a cat creeping on its prey.

"I reckon you would find out that you had bit off more than you could chew!" the driver remarked, endeavoring to conceal the anger, which he evidently felt, under the disguise of sarcasm.

"Oh, don't you go any wealth on that, for I have got the biggest kind of a swallow; but, I say, what became of the two ladies who were in the coach? Did they put up at any hotel in El Paso?"

"Darned if I know," the other replied, with an attempt to appear indifferent, although the Fresh conjectured that he was much troubled by the question.

"Why, you certainly ought to know something about it!" the sport retorted.

"Didn't you notice where they went after they quitted the stage—wasn't there somebody in El Paso to meet them?"

"They didn't go to El Paso, as you must know, since you are so durned inquisitive," blurted out the driver, evidently bothered by the sport's importunities, and yet not exactly knowing how to get rid of them.

"Oh, they didn't?"

"Not much!"

"Where did they go?"

"None of your durned business!" replied the driver in a rage.

As if by magic a revolver appeared in the hand of the Fresh, and almost before the echo of the driver's words died away on the air, he found himself "covered" by the seven-shooter.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, or I'll let daylight right through you!" the Fresh cried, in a tone which plainly indicated he meant every word he said.

And the speedy manner in which the two passengers withdrew their heads from the coach windows and plumped down on all-fours in the body of the vehicle, so as to be out of the way of a stray bullet, was really laughable.

The driver was in a "hole," to use the common term.

He was armed, but under the circumstances his weapons were no more use to him than if they had been so many harmless sticks.

"Hold on—hold on; don't you be so durned fresh!" remonstrated the threatened man.

"There it goes again—too fresh," muttered the sport under his breath.

"The name must fit me well, since almost every man-Jack I meet applies it to me without the least hesitation."

"I didn't go for to rile yer—'tain't any of your business, anyway, and I don't see why you should trouble your head about the matter!"

"Well, that is the kind of man I am. I am as curious as a woman, and feel a great desire to know what became of those two charming girls, so just you spit out the information as quickly as you can."

"I can't tell you much about them. Neither one of them went into El Paso. The old buffer called out for me to pull up, just as we got within sight of the town—'bout half a mile

from it, I reckon, and then, all three on 'em got out, told me to drive on, for they would walk the rest of the way, and that is all I know about it, for I ain't seen hide nor ha'r of any one of 'em since."

The Fresh felt sure that the man was trying to deceive him with a falsehood, and, while he was delivering the tale, was revolving in his mind whether it would be better to tax him with the lie on the instant, or to allow him to think that his effort was successful.

Upon this latter course the sport decided.

He was satisfied now that the driver was a confederate of the Red Riders, and the suspicion came into his mind that the ladies had fallen into the power of the outlaws.

His presence in the coach prevented the marauders from carrying off the girls, and that was the reason why he was removed to a distance and the vehicle sent on without him.

This accounted, too, for the strenuous effort which had been made to keep him from taking passage in the stage; the outlaws wanted no witness to their crime.

Then, after they got him out of the vehicle they determined to kill him, so that he would not make inquiries in regard to the ladies when he got his freedom and arrived in El Paso.

It was evidently a deep-laid plot, and the Red Riders had some important object in view, or else they would never have taken so much trouble about the matter.

He had, with his usual luck, become mixed up in a dark mystery, and since he had blindly tumbled into the matter, as it were, he resolved to see it through, and his game at present, he decided, was to affect to be satisfied with the explanation of the stage-driver.

"Ah, yes, I see," he said, with a satisfied nod of the head; "that accounts for you not knowing about them."

"Well, I am really sorry, for I took a fancy to those two sweet creatures, and I was in hopes I would be able to see them again."

"Why, you kin do that as easy as rolling off a log!" the driver exclaimed, and the Fresh could detect by the expression on his face that the fellow was chuckling in his sleeve over the idea that he had succeeded in deceiving him with his clumsy-concocted yarn.

"Yes, sir-ee!" the Jehu exclaimed, decidedly. "I reckon that won't be the least bit of difficulty 'bout getting in on that racket."

"Two such good-looking heifers as them pieces of calico ain't going to hide themselves away in no town like El Paso!"

"Why, I would be willing to bet big money that you will strike them inside of a day."

"And I say, pard, if I were you I would keep a shet mouth 'bout them road 'fellows,' the fellow continued, warningly.

"They notified me that if I blabbed much 'bout them they would lay me out, and you kin jest bet I ain't a-taking any chances."

"No more am I. Well, so long."

Our hero stepped to one side, and the coach went on its way.

An hour later Jackson Blake was in El Paso, hot on the scent.

CHAPTER IX.

IN EL PASO

EL PASO, on the Rio Grande, consists of two towns.

El Paso del Norte, the old Mexican settlement on the west bank of the river, and El Paso, the American village, on the east bank.

At the time of which we write the American settlement did not amount to much, but El Paso del Norte was an important point, as it has been for many years.

A rich agricultural country is tributary to the place, and then it is the headquarters for the stockmen of the neighborhood, being far the largest town in the province of Chihuahua, north of the capital, which is an ancient and important city.

Upon making cautious inquiries in the American settlement, the Fresh discovered that the end of the stage route was in the Mexican town; that the coach had come in without passengers on its down trip, the driver telling the same story he had related to him in regard to the three getting off just outside the town, but he had added in addition, that their reasons for so doing were they had met a team which had come for them from some point down the river.

"The fellow forgot to put that in when he told the yarn to me," mused the Fresh as he reflected upon the matter.

"There's an old adage that liars should have good memories."

Another important fact the sport discovered: the driver had not said a word in regard to the stage being attacked by the Red Riders.

After proving this information our hero crossed the river to the Mexican town, and there he too pushed his inquiries, but learned nothing beyond what he had acquired in the American settlement.

There were quite a number of Americans domiciled in the old Mexican town, and one of the saloons and restaurants, faring on the plaza, displayed the name of the United States hotel.

And when the Fresh saw that the majority of

its patrons seemed to be English-speaking people, he came to the conclusion it would be the best place for him to select for a headquarters.

Entering the hotel the Fresh explained that he was a stranger who had come to El Paso with the idea of speculating a bit, and asked what was the best they could do for him.

The host was a burly, good-natured, red-faced, sandy-bearded, German-American, Jacob Hammerheimer by name, but as this was entirely too much trouble to pronounce, he was seldom called anything but Big Jake.

The hotel was run after the usual fashion common on the frontier.

The guests paid so much for a room and got their meals where they liked.

Our hero made his usual favorable impression upon the landlord, and as he frankly said that he didn't have any more money than he knew what to do with, the genial German let him have a good room at an extremely reasonable rate.

"How's business in El Paso?" the Fresh inquired after he had completed the bargain by paying for his room a week in advance—the common custom.

"'Tis quiet shust now; de only blaces dat do der big monish make are der gambling houses."

In El Paso all kind of gambling games were conducted in the most open manner.

The plaza was lined with saloons where the seeker after a short road to fortune could find almost any kind of game that he desired to play.

The Fresh had noted this fact, and as he could be a "bird of prey" himself when it was necessary, he was not sorry to see that there were plenty of chances for the exercise of his skill.

"By the way do you know a Jew trader, named Hadad Solomons?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, I shust do; his blace is on der street below, running from der plaza."

"What kind of a man is he?"

"A hard case, mine friend; he alive will skin you if he gets der chance."

"What does he deal in?"

"Everyt'ing—he has der peddlers out all through der south, und here in El Paso he does the most of der pawn-proking business."

"Ah, yes, I see."

"Your eye you will keep peeled und you deal mid him much," the kindly German observed with a shrewd wink.

The Fresh thanked the landlord for his caution; and then sauntered to the outside of the hotel where he took possession of one of the chairs placed there for the accommodation of the guests.

After being seated, our hero fell to musing upon the situation.

"This Jew is evidently the 'fence' through whose aid the Red Riders get rid of their plunder, and from that circumstance I judge that the odds are big that the marauders have their headquarters right in this very town.

"That is their game, for in all ventures of this desperate kind, it is the bold game that wins.

"When the authorities make a determined effort to catch such a gang as these Red Riders of Rayan, about the last place the average police captain would think of looking for them would be in a town of this size, right under his very nose, and yet the old adage says, 'the devil lurks always in the shadow of the church,' and there's a deal of truth in the speech too I think."

"I am on the right spot then for business and if I keep my eyes open I will undoubtedly get on the track before long."

"I have an idea that I will be able to recognize the Red Rider captain if I chance to meet him in his own proper person, although all I could see of his face was the eyes, and he took particular care to disguise his voice."

"It is evident that there is some foul play on foot in regard to the two girls."

"The pretended stockman and they were strangers to each other, for the statement was distinctly made, and it is not probable that the girls would allow a falsehood to be uttered in regard to the matter in their presence without contradicting it."

"How ridiculous then the statement that all the passengers left the stage before reaching El Paso.

"Oh, no, the girls are in the hands of the Red Riders; there isn't the least doubt in my mind about that. But what motive had the marauders for so bold a deed, for the abduction of two young ladies is something out of the common. Escobedo is a Mexican name and I must see if I can't find out something about the family."

"The tall girl, Isabel, was a Mexican beyond a doubt, but the other, Margaret, looked more like an American, and Margaret is not a Mexican name, either."

At this point the sport's meditations were disturbed by the approach of a stranger, a middle-aged man, rather under-sized, but extremely stockily built, and evidently possessed of uncommon strength.

He had a rough weather-beaten face, lit up by a pair of small, gray eyes of wonderful sharpness.

His sandy hair was thickly sprinkled with gray, and being rather long, stuck out in all

directions, as if it disdained to yield to the influence of brush and comb.

A scrubby beard covered the man's chin, growing thin and wiry as though it lacked nutriment.

He was dressed in a complete suit of buckskin, decidedly the worse for wear, and the Fresh who was a good judge of character, at once set him down for an old mountain man "playing in hard luck."

One particularly odd thing about the man the keen-eyed sport noticed at the first glance, and that was, the new-comer wore no weapons.

At the time of which we write, almost everybody on the frontier went armed, and to see a scout, or an old mountain man without his weapons boldly displayed, was an extremely rare sight.

The weapon belt, supporting the holsters from which the butt of the revolvers protruded, and with the keen-edged bowie shoved through it, was as much a part of the "outfit" as the hunting-shirt itself.

The stranger wore the belt all right, but the holsters were empty and the buck-horn handle of the bowie knife "was conspicuous by its absence," to use an Irish bull.

The new-comer took a look at the sport as if he was going through the process of "sizing him up," and then, with a nod and a "how-d'y," took a chair by his side.

"Nice day, sir," observed the Fresh, with an idea of cultivating the acquaintance of the odd-looking man.

"Stranger, it ar' a nice day, but I don't bank on it for a cent!" the other replied with a doleful shake of the head.

"Is that so?"

"True as preachin'! It was my horn you heered a-blowl' that time!"

"What is the trouble?"

"This is a lively town?"

"Yes, it certainly has that appearance."

This was true enough, for the plaza was full of people, and all the shops—particularly the gambling dens—seemed to be doing an excellent business.

"Stranger, this ar' El Paso is the whited sepulcher that I onc't heered the Gospel sharp talk about!" remarked the other in a very solemn way.

"You don't mean it?"

"I am giving it to you as square as a die!"

"Then I infer that the town hasn't treated you just right?"

"They have picked me, young pard, 'bout as clean as though I was a chicken getting ready for to be roasted!" replied the other with a melancholy shake of the head.

"Well, that ain't the square thing, is it?"

"Not much it ain't!" exclaimed the stranger, decidedly.

"This is the first time in years that I have been down in this country, and the town has changed mighty."

"I'm no tenderfoot, you know, but an old rustler, and 'bout as tough as they make 'em. Many a year have I roughed it up and down these western wilds."

"Why, it was so long ago when I came out hyer that the Rio Grande was nothing but a brook then and it has growed up since into a river!"

"Yes, yes, I see," responded Blake, sympathetically swallowing the yarn without a protest.

"And to think that an old sodger like myself should come into El Paso, git full'n a goat on their durned Mexican whisky, and then go to banking a game and git cleaned out of all my wealth, and my we'pons, and everything worth having—a rustler like myself, who has hoofed it from the Mississippi to the land of Sundown—the old Calif'ny Joe!"

CHAPTER X.

THE STORY OF ESCOBEDO.

THE name of the stranger was perfectly familiar to the sport.

Old California Joe was one of the best known men on the border.

As a scout and mountain-man he stood second to none of the pioneers of the West, with the possible exception of Kit Carson. The Fresh was glad that the chance of fortune had brought him in contact with such a man.

He was in need of just such a pard.

Fortune decidedly was standing his friend, for the fact that the old mountain-man had been cleaned out by the El Paso sharpers would be apt to make him willing to join company with any man who had a scheme on hand which required the assistance of such a genius as himself.

"California Joe, eh?" our hero remarked, taking a good look at his companion, "well, I have often heard of you, and I am right glad to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance, particularly as I hail from the Pacific Slope myself," and the sport extended his hand which was at once warmly grasped by the other.

"You don't say so!" the old mountain-man cried.

"Wa-al, now, durn my old gizzard if I ain't as glad to meet a man from Calif'ny as an ole

he-b'ar would be to run up ag'in' a holler tree chock-full of honey!"

And he shook the hand of the other with true Western heartiness.

"My name is Jackson Blake; I am something of a sport, and being of a rather impulsive nature bear the nickname of the Fresh of 'Frisco!"

"You don't mean it?" cried the old trapper, gazing with great interest in the face of the other.

"That's my handle, and I judge from your face that you have heard of me."

"You kin bet yer bottom dollar I hev, although I never happened to run up ag'in' you afore."

"But a lot of my pards knew ye, and one, and all of 'em, allers said that for a fellow who got his living by being a sporting sharp you was the squarest white man that ever stepped foot on this solid airth!"

"I am glad to hear that my reputation is so good."

"And you are a sport from Sportville, hey?" queried the old mountain-man in an eager way.

"So I have been tol'."

"And you kin hold yer own ag'in' any of these wolves who run a brace game and ring in a cold deal whenever they git a chance!"

"Well, I have always succeeded in doing so, and, maybe, as a rule, I come out a leetle ahead," the sport replied, carelessly, as though he did not consider it becoming to boast of his abilities in this line.

"Do you s'pose you kin skin some of these wolves that hev their dens hyer in El Paso?"

"I can't really say about that, you know, until I get a chance to see how big the wolves are. If they are only common, ordinary cattle, I can generally beat them at their own game, and I don't care how finely they work it. If it is an up-and-up wolf—a regular big chief—away up at the top of the heap—I might not be able to do the trick."

"Oh, I reckon these are jest common sharps, although they skinned me almost bar' to the bone, but then, if I hadn't hi'-ted 'bout 'nuff benzine to float a ship, I don't think they could have worked the game so slick."

"They seem to have got away with about all you have," remarked the Fresh, with a glance at the empty belt of the scout.

"I see that even your weapons are gone."

"Yes, like the biggest kind of a durned fool, I went and blew them in arter my money give out."

"Pard, I was so crazy for gambling that I r'ally believe I would have fired this old buck-skin suit of mine in if I had had any other rags to put on."

"Oh, I don't doubt that they would have taken it," the Fresh remarked.

"Such sharps as you evidently fell in with, would take anything."

"Oh, no, you are wrong thar," the other replied. "These fellows pretend to be terribly high-toned, and arter I blew in my money and wanted to put up my watch and chain, and some trinkets I had, they allowed that they didn't keep no pawnbroker's shop and told me to go 'round the corner to old Solomons's shebang."

The Fresh pricked up his ears, metaphorically speaking, at this.

"Habad Solomons, the old Jew?"

"Yes, that is the identical cuss, and a tough ole rooster he is; I know him of old; I knew him years ago when he used to hold out in Santa Fe."

"A hard case, eh?"

"You bet! He had to dust out of Santa Fe right lively—'tween two days, to use the old saying."

"He got in trouble, then?"

"Oh, a heap! He wasn't as keerful 'bout buying things as he might be."

"He never troubled himself to ax any questions when any galoots brought plunder into his shebang; it was all the same to him whether it was honestly their own or whether they stole it."

"Things got so bad at last that the citizens couldn't stand it, and they jest got right up on their ears, and were going to treat the old Jew to a dance upon nothin' with a rope 'round his neck to keep him up, but he got wind of the picnic and vamosed the ranch afore the citizens got good and ready."

"I suppose he is the same old sixpence down here in El Paso?"

"Oh, yes, he won't ax any questions, and he won't give nowhar near the value of the things," the old scout replied.

"Why, to give you an idee—on my barkers, a pair of Colt's navy, as fine tools as a man ever handled—cost me a fifty spot six months ago in Albuquerque—all the ole scoundrel would allow was ten dollars, and it is going to cost me fifteen if I redeem them within a month and an increase of five dollars a month after that."

"Well, I call that pretty steep."

"Yes, I reckon the old cuss must be pulling in the money by the cart-load."

"I am sorry to hear that he is such a skinflint, for I expect to have a little business with him myself."

"You want to keep your eyes open or he will skin you clear to the bone."

"I'll look out for him," and at this point it occurred to the Fresh that perhaps his companion would be able to afford him the information of which he was in search, and so he immediately proceeded to question him.

"By the way are you much acquainted with the people in this neighborhood?"

"I reckon I am. It used to be my old stamping ground. I lived down the river a piece for five years. I was with one of the biggest cattle-raisers that there was in this part of the country; mighty wise man he was too—as long as I live I shall never forget him. He's dead and gone now; I didn't know it, or you kin bet your bottom dollar I wouldn't have booked for this town."

"I was calculating to git a job from him ag'in or else I wouldn't have come this way."

"He wasn't no common Mexican—no durned Greaser, but a high-toned Spaniard—as fine a gen'leman as I ever met was that same Estevan Escobedo!"

It was hard work for the Fresh to refrain from showing his surprise at the unexpected utterance of the name.

"Decidedly the blind goddess, Dame Fortune, is standing my friend," the sport mused to himself as the old plainsman allowed his head to sink upon his breast, the memories of the past coming back to him.

"Here is a man who can tell me all about the Escobedo family, having been an inmate of the Escobedo household. Decidedly I am in luck!"

"Yes, yes, he was a mighty fine man, Senor Estevan!" California Joe declared, rousing himself from his abstraction.

"He was the cattle-king of the Rio Grande, and was reckoned to be one of the richest men in the province of Chihuahua."

"You have excited my interest, for there was a couple of ladies in the stage, in which I came, by the name of Escobedo."

"Oh, thar's a hull raft of them—distant relations of the cattle-king, but he only had one gal."

"A tall beautiful girl with dark hair and eyes, Isabel by name?"

"Oh, no, that's the gal of another stock, third or fourth cousins, or something of that sort," the other replied.

"I know the gal you speak of—she's got a brother, Manuel, one of the wildest young devils in all Mexico."

"Both of them were brought up by the old cattle-king, and, I reckon, that at one time they thought the old man would leave them something handsome when he kicked the bucket, but they were disappointed, so the folks told me, 'cos the old man left all his property to his darter in the East."

"Thar's a bit of a yarn 'bout Senor Estevan's wife and darter," explained the old scout.

"He married a Yankee gal that he met onc't when he was on an eastern trip, and after she got out hyer, she was lonesome and homesick."

"The Don was a mighty quick-tempered cuss, and he didn't like it. She was a poor gal and he thought she ought to be glad to have sich a home as he gave her, so they kinder quarreled, and, at last, when the little gal who had come of the marriage was about five years old, the mother lit out for the old home with the darter.

"The Don was too mighty proud to try for to git them back, but sent his wife word that when she had s'arved long eauff to cure her of her folly she could come back."

"But the gal was plucky, and she didn't starve. She stuck it out till the old man died, and all his folks were glad, for they reckoned they would come in for a slice of the big property; but, at the last moment, the old man made a will, leaving everything to his darter, and fixed the thing all up with the lawyers, so that she won't have any trouble in getting the money."

"The Don only died 'bout a month ago, so when I struck the town I got the story right fresh."

"What is the daughter's name?"

"Margaret."

"Oho! Why, that was the name of the other girl in the coach, but there wasn't any mother with her."

And then the Fresh related to his companion all that had occurred from the time he went into the stage-ranch at Las Cruces to get a place in the coach, until he arrived at El Paso, not omitting to detail his suspicions.

"That gal was the old Don's heir," California Joe declared. "And you are right, by hookey! Thar's foul play afoot!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE PAWNBROKER.

THE Fresh was glad to have his suspicions confirmed by so expert a judge as the old plainsman, and he resolved to speak plainly to him.

"As you see, I have, just by accident, got mixed up in this matter, and, being so 'fresh,' you know, have made up my mind to see the thing through."

"I know that it ain't any of my funeral, but I have resolved to have a finger in the pie."

"Right you air, and no mistake!" exclaimed the old mountain-man, promptly. "And I say, Blake, if you keer to have a pard, I am ready to go in with you."

"The very thing I would have asked!" replied the Fresh.

"Put it thar!" cried California Joe, extending his horny-palmed hand.

The two exchanged a warm grip.

"I'm yer pard until death do us two part, as I heerd a Gospel sharp once say."

"I am just the chap who ought to hev a spoon in this soup, for I ate the bread of the old Don and took his money for many a day."

"No man on top of this hyer solid footstool has a better right to stand up and fight for the darter of Estevan Escobedo."

"From the fact of this Isabel being with the daughter, it would seem that they are on friendly terms, and most certainly they appeared to be."

"I know that Isabel—she's a gal of 'bout twenty-five now!"

"Yes, about that age."

"She is a p'ison cat, unless she has changed mightyli," California Joe observed.

"I remember her well; both she and her brother Manuel, who is five or six years older than she, were on the old Don's ranch."

"She was jest as pleasant as pie to the cattle-king, but when he wasn't 'round she used to let her temper out."

"We all reckoned that she was trying to keep on the right side of the old Don, so as to get some of his money when he passed in his checks; the brother, too, was on his good behavior when the old man was about, but jest before I quit the ranch he got into a stabbing-match up here in one of the El Paso gambling-houses, and so had to make himself skeere."

"The thing was so public that it couldn't be hushed up, and the old Don was as mad as hops, 'cos he had been completely hoodwinked, not having any idee of what a wild devil the galoot was."

"The two expected to be the cattle-king's heirs?"

"They did, for sure!"

"And when the old man willed everything to his daughter they, of course, were terribly disappointed."

"Oh, you bet they must have been, and from what I know of that tiger-cat, I would be willing to take my cath that she felt like putting a knife into the lawyer sharp w'ot drawed the will."

"Do you know anything about these outlaws—these Red Riders of Rayon?"

"Nary thing! Never heered tell on the gang until you spit it out. I reckon they are a new band, for there wasn't any sich galoots in this section when I used to travel around hyer."

"I begin to see the tail of a very large rat!" exclaimed the Fresh, as a new idea came into his mind.

"As I told you, I suspected that this Jackson, who said he was a stockman, was a confederate of the Red Riders, but I did not suspect that the girl was in league with them, but now I do, for when the road-agents made their a'tack she threw her arms around me, pretending to be dreadfully frightened, and clung to me in such a way that I couldn't get at my weapons, for I certainly would have fought them, single-handed!"

"In course!" exclaimed the old scout, "that was her little game to a dot. Oh, I tell you, she is a p'isoned sarpint, and no mistake!"

"Now, then, the motive is plain to me of the abduction!" the Fresh declared.

"This brother and sister concocted the plot, and they have got the Red Riders to carry Margaret Escobedo off."

"I reckon you have got it down as fine as silk!" the old mountain-man declared. "And the odds are big that this Manuel Escobedo is one of the Red Rider gang. He's none too good for it, I can tell you!"

"Then, if they kill the old Don's daughter, all the property will go to this precious pair."

"Oh, no, you're out thar! not by a jugful!" California Joe declared.

"They ain't the next of kin; thar's 'bout a hundred others jest as near to the old Don."

"Oh, no, I reckon that ain't their game, 'cos they wouldn't make enuff by it to warrant the risk."

"Why on earth then has the girl been carried off?" demanded the Fresh, perplexed.

"You air too much for me, John," responded California Joe, shaking his head with the air of a sage.

"Well, it isn't any use of speculating upon the subject; that will not bring us any nearer to the truth."

"We are pards, and in for the war!"

"You bet!"

And again the allies grasped hands.

"The first thing in order is to raise funds, for I am not as well heeled as I ought to be to engage in a struggle of this kind."

"And I am away down to the bed-rock, com-

pletely cleaned out. Nary two coins left for to rub ag'in' one another."

"That is a bad showing, for money is the sinews of war, and then you must have some weapons, too, for this ain't the kind of country for a man to travel around unarmed."

"You kin bet high on it; and that reminds me of the old joke, a man mought go 'round in this hyer country for twenty years and not need a we'pon, but when he does need one, he wants it like blazes!"

"Here's a pretty fair weapon—a self cocker, and not a bad tool," and as he spoke the Fresh drew the revolver from its holster and gave it to the scout who examined it with a critical eye.

Then the sport passed over a box of cartridges.

"Now I have a pair of revolvers for the Jew pawnbroker," and he showed them to the other.

"I ought to get ten dollars on them and then I have a diamond ring worth a hundred dollars of any man's money, and on that I must have twenty-five at the least. As a rule, if the man who makes the loan is a good judge I can get fifty, but I don't anticipate more than twenty-five from this party, judging from what I hear about him."

"He is a skin from Skinsville!" the old scout observed, senteatiuously.

"But I say, how on airth did you manage to save yer sparkler from these hyer Red Rider galoots."

The Fresh laughed.

"Oh, I'm an old sport, you know, and one of the cardinal rules for a man in my business is always to have some little trinket of this kind put away for a rainy day. What the French call the dernier resource. Not to be used until the last extremity."

"A diamond, you see, takes up but little room—great value in small space, and money can be quickly raised upon it."

"As for the Red Riders—no such men as they are—clumsy ruffians—are going to put salt on the tail of a rare bird like myself."

"I have the ring snugly hidden away in a fold of my hunting-shirt, fastened in with needle and thread," and then, thrusting his hand into his bosom, he soon brought the gem to light.

"Thunder! it is a beauty!" California Joe exclaimed as the sport flashed the diamond before his eyes.

"Yes, any first-class jeweler would charge at least a hundred and a quarter for the thing, and, as I observed, it is dirt cheap at a hundred. "But come, let's be off for the Jew's and see what the old beat will do for us."

"You're right thar!" California Joe observed, following the Fresh's example and rising from his seat. "A bigger old beat don't draw the breath of life on this hyer Mexican soil."

As the landlord had said, the abode of the pawnbroker was just around the corner.

It was a common, private house, not a store, and on the door was a small tin sign which displayed the magical three balls, and underneath the emblem was the name—

HADAD SOLOMONS.

On the door was an old-fashioned brass knocker, and the Fresh raised the echoes of the street with a couple of lusty raps.

"Hey, you believe in sailing in, don't you?" ejaculated the old mountain-man, astonished at the manner of the other, so different from the usual sneaky way in which most men approach their "uncle" when in need of his services.

"Oh, yes, why should a man be ashamed of a little financial transaction of this kind?"

"A merchant marches into a bank and borrows money upon his collaterals as bold as brass, but he sneaks to the pawnbroker's as though he fancied he was doing something dishonest."

"Why should there such a difference be 'tween tweedledum and tweedledee?"

"Sport, you are away up at the top of the heap!" exclaimed the old mountain-man, admiringly.

"Yes, I am so fresh that saltpeter will not save me, let alone common, plebeian salt."

At this point a small, secret panel, about six inches square, in the upper part of the door opened, and there appeared the features of the withered, yellow-skinned Hebrew.

His little, dark eyes, deep-sunken in the head, and shining like two jet-black beads—more like an animal's orbs than the eyes of a human—surveyed the Fresh, who was close to the door, with considerable curiosity.

"Mine gootness, mine frien', you believe in making a noise!" exclaimed the old man, who had one of the soft, wheedling voice peculiar to some male's of his race.

"Wherefore have you the knocker on the door, if not to knock, oh, son of Israel and child of Judea?" answered the sport.

"Mine gootness!" exclaimed the old man, perplexed by the theatrical address, "what manner of man are you, mine fr'en'?"

"A customer who knocks loudly at your door that you may bid him enter in the name of the tribe of Abraham, so that you may a vast sum of shekels reap from his visit."

"Oho, you makes game mit me, mine fr'en'!"

exclaimed the pawnbroker, evidently a little annoyed by the style of the speech.

"No, sir; child of Egypt's ancient land, I wouldn't be guilty of doing anything of the kind for two dollars and a half!"

"That is not the kind of man I am. I come on business—in fact, I am old business from Businessville.

"See, I have a sparkler here to sell you!" and the Fresh flashed the light of the diamond in the eyes of the Jew.

"There, gaze on that and weep! Never has the world seen a finer jewel since the day when Egypt's star-eyed queen sailed down the stream to meet the Roman, Antony, and by so doing changed the fortunes of a world!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE SPORT AND THE JEW.

The eyes of the old Jew blinked like the orbs of an animal exposed suddenly to the light.

Never in all his experience had he encountered such a man as the one who now applied for admission.

"Mine gootness, mine fr'en', is your head all right?" he inquired. "Do you know what you are talking about?"

"Oh, you can bet the wealth of all your tribe on that! Come now, unbar your door and get your ducats ready! I am going to give you the best trade that you have struck since you took up our abode in El Paso."

Just at this moment the old Jew happened to catch sight of California Joe.

"Ah, my goot fr'en', California Joe, do you come with this young mans?"

"Yes, yes, he's got sore stuff for you; he comes on my recommendation. I told him that you would skin him as well as any man in the town."

"Aha, mine fr'en', you are fond of a joke. It is goot. I joke myself sometimes," and the ancient Hebrew displayed his yellow, fang-like teeth in a sort of a sardonic grin.

Then he unbarred his door and admitted the visitors.

The entrance led directly into the main room of the house, which was an apartment about fifteen feet square.

Across one side of it was a small counter, and in the rear wall a door which evidently led into another apartment.

After the two were in the room the Jew carefully barred the door again.

"I see, Hadad, my boy, that you take precious good care to have your house arranged so that no one can get in unless you choose to let them," the Fresh remarked.

"Oh, yesh, there are plenty of bad mans around," remarked the old Jew, in his soft, insinuating way, rubbing his hands gently together.

"Der people hafe an idea that I am a rich man, but it is not so; I am poor, very poor; trade ish not goot; I loose me mooch monish; people will not believe me when I tell them dis, though. Ah! when der world gets an idea into its head it is hard work to beat it out sometimes, mine fr'en's."

"Yes, you are right thar!" California Joe exclaimed.

"Now, for myself, if any one had ax me how you were fixed, I would have sworn that you were just rolling in money."

"That was my notion!" chimed in the Fresh. "If I were a craftsman, and on the house-breaking lay, I don't know a crib in Mexico which I would sooner try to crack than this ranch of yours here."

The old Jew's alarm was immediately excited by this speech.

"Mine gootness, you would not make nothing by such foolishness as that."

"Besides, I am prepared for any bad mans that may into my place come to rob me. See!"

The pawnbroker waved his hand, and a secret panel in the back wall, about two feet square, opened suddenly, and in the entrance appeared a Jewish lad of eighteen or thereabouts, with a revolver which he flourished in the air in an extremely menacing way.

"I see! I see!" exclaimed the Fresh. "This is a leetle scheme which you have for the benefit of any bold blade who comes in here with the idea of cleaning out the ranch."

"Yesh, I must protect myself, mine fr'en'," chuckled the old Jew, enjoying the surprise of his visitors.

"It's a nice leetle scheme, but if you were dealing with such a man as myself it wouldn't work wort a cent," the Fresh remarked, in the most matter-of-fact and business-like way.

The pawnbroker took the alarm immediately.

"Why not, why not, mine fr'en'?"

"Because it wouldn't," repeated the California sport.

"Why, such a sharp as I am would get the deadwood on you without any trouble."

"How so, how so? Explain yourself, mine fr'en'! Upon my word, I think you are too much with your mouth talking," the old man declared, incredulously.

"Nary time! See!"

And then, as if by magic, a revolver appeared

in the Fresh's hand, and in a twinkling he had the Jewish youth covered.

"This is a self-cocker!" the sport explained. "One pull and off she goes!"

"Now, then, son of Israel, where are you?"

"Before your gentle youth there can draw a bead on me I could send a bullet crashing through his brain, then another bullet settles your hash—only two shots, mind you, and both of you are done for, and in a town like this, where revolver-shots are not uncommon, the chances are about a hundred to one that no one would take any notice of the firing, and if they did, the door here is stoutly barred—you've got it arranged as if you expected to keep out an army—and before the barrier could be forced, we two could help ourselves to all your portable plunder, and be able to make our escape by the back way, while the front door was being beaten in."

The terror of the Jew was extreme; never before in all his life of strange adventure had he been caught in such a trap, and as for the youth with the revolver, he trembled as though he had the ague.

Little fitted was he to contend with such a daring sport as the Californian.

"Ho, ho, ho!" roared California Joe, enjoying the joke hugely, "it 'pears to me, Solomons, as if you were in the worst kind of a fix."

"Say, hadn't you better give us four or five thousand dollars and call the thing squar'?"

"Oh, mine fr'en's, you are not in earnest—you do not mean to rob a poor man in this way?" the Jew pleaded.

The trap had been sprung upon him so unexpectedly that he was not quite sure whether it was a joke or if the pair were in earnest.

If they were not in jest, then surely he was doomed to be plundered in a truly wholesale manner.

"Oh, mine fr'en's, I will treat you well—I always treat everybody well, is it not so, California Joe?" he cried, appealing to the old mountain-man.

"Oh, yes, you skin 'em as clean as you kin—that ain't the least doubt about that."

"Young man, drop that shooting-iron!" cried the sport, abruptly, to the Jewish lad, and the youth complied with the command as quickly as though the pistol had suddenly become red-hot.

"Now make yourself scarce and shut that slide, and remember, don't try any monkey business behind it, for the bullet from my pistol would go through that thin board without the least bit of difficulty, and lay you out before you could say Jack Robinson!"

"Shut pan, now, I tell you!"

The boy was prompt to obey the injunction, and when the room resumed its normal appearance, the Fresh shoved his revolver back into its holster and laughed in the face of the astonished Jew.

"There, Father Abraham, that is the way to do business! Stop your shivering, for you are not in the least danger. I only wanted to give you a taste of my quality and show you what kind of a man I am."

"We are on the square, California Joe and I, and you are just as safe with us as though you had the whole Mexican army at your back to protect you."

"Yesh, yesh, mine fr'en', I was quite sure of that all the time!" the pawnbroker exclaimed, forcing a smile, although it was as much as he could do to keep his nerves quiet after the violent scare which he had received.

"You ought to be much obliged to me for showing how easily some bold fellow could get away with your wealth," the sport observed.

"Of course you know how many men there are always floating around a town of this kind who would have the sand to take a big risk for the sake of getting a few ducats."

"California and I are pretty desperate fellows, and we are about down to the bed-rock, still we would scorn to raise money in any such way. We are no Red Riders, you know."

The words were uttered carelessly, but the sharp had his keen eyes on the face of the old Jew as he uttered the words.

Solomons was an old bird and not easily trapped, but in spite of his self-control he could not prevent his bead-like eyes from snapping a little when the name of the gang fell upon his ears.

"The Red Riders, eh? and who are they?" he asked in a very innocent way.

"Oh, come, to make out that you don't know the men who add to your gains is a leetle too thin!"

"So help me Moses, I know them not!" the Jew declared.

"Well, that is mighty odd for they know you."

Again the sharp-eyed Fresh detected the peculiar look in the orbs of the Jew.

Evidently he was perplexed by the positive statement.

"Oh, well, that may be," he said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Of course, a man in my business is known to a great many people whom he does not know."

"Well, from the way these outlaws spoke I had an idea that you did business with them."

This speech caused the old Jew to manifest genuine alarm.

"Oh, mine gootness, mine frien', you must not believe everything that you hear!" he declared. "I tell you I know them not! I am an honest man, so help me Moses! It is not my fault if bad men say that I do business with them, but I do not! It is a lie!"

"Well, if you ain't careful maybe these rascals will get you into difficulties with their loose talk," the Fresh remarked.

"That is as true as preaching!" California Joe asserted. "Why, I have known good men to be hanged on account of just such loose talk, so you had better mind your eye, I warn you, you know, as an old time friend, for you are a man that I think a heap of, and it would go ag'in' my grain to see you up in the air a-dancing on nothing to the tune of the rogue's march."

This was putting it a little too strong and the aged Hebrew perceived that his visitors were amusing themselves by playing upon his fears.

"Oh, no," he responded, shaking his head with a confident air, "there isn't any danger of any one harming me."

"This is not an American mining-camp, but an old Mexican city, with laws and police, and Judge Lynch has no court here."

"The authorities know me too—they know I am an honest man, and it would require strong proof to convince them that I have anything to do with these outlaws—with these Red Riders of whom you speak."

"Perhaps some of the men in authority have a finger in the pie themselves," suggested the Fresh. "Such a thing as a captain of police being in with an outlaw gang has been known."

CHAPTER XIII.

A BUSINESS TRANSACTION.

THE unexpected shot struck home.

There was a look in the eyes of the Jew which showed that he winced at the thrust.

Perfect as was the control which the old man had over his features yet his eyes betrayed his feeling once in the while to such a close observer as the sport.

He recovered from the effect quickly though. "Mine fr'en' let me caution you as a man who knows this town, to be careful how you talk such things in public," he remarked, in the kindest possible manner.

"You might much trouble make for yourself. The police of El Paso are a high-toned set of gentlemen—some of them are rash and impulsive too—the captain of police particularly so, and if it should come to his ears that you had hinted that any of the police force were in league with a band of outlaws it would be sure to cost you dear."

"Oh, well, I'm not afraid of your saying anything about it. You wouldn't go back on me, I know!" the Fresh declared.

"You see I have perfect faith in you, old man; I know that you are one of the right sort and wouldn't betray a pard."

The Jew elevated his eyebrows as much as to say that he didn't quite like the familiar way of the American.

"I know that you are true blue to your customers, for if you wasn't the Red Riders would never dare to trust you."

This announcement irritated the pawnbroker.

"Mine gootness, mine fr'en', I tell you again I nothing know about the Red Riders!" he exclaimed, angrily.

"What did they say of me to make you believe I know aught of them?"

The sport then explained the arrangement he had made with the Red Riders in regard to redeeming his revolvers.

The brow of the old Jew cleared as he listened to the tale.

"Aha!" he cried, rubbing his hands briskly together, evidently feeling decidedly relieved, "you see they do not claim to be customers of mine. Is it not as I told you? Oho! I am an honest man! Ask anybody who knows me and they will tell you so. I buy and I sell. Sometimes I admit in the course of trade I buy goods that are stolen, but how can I tell? I do not buy them knowingly."

"If the man swears that the articles belong to him, how is it possible for me to know that the man lies?"

"You come my shop in to do business with me now; you have something to pawn or to sell: am I then to think you have stolen goods?"

"Oh, no, you look like an honest man; I will not your feelings hurt by such a suspicion."

"True, I am sometimes deceived—where is there a man in this world who is not?"

"Very true! Your head is level there," the sport assented.

"And about your revolvers; did not the outlaws say that through some of my peddlers in the South they would get the pistols to me?"

"That was their say-so."

"I cannot answer for all of my peddlers—there are ten or fifteen of them; it would be asking too much of me."

"There may be a black sheep in the flock—some fellow who is in league with these Red Riders, I know not. It is not possible for me to know."

"All I can say is that my men deal honestly

with me; if they did not, I would not trade with them."

"I will bear your revolvers in mind. I will speak to my men and I haven't the least doubt I can get them for you, although it is a very large price that you have agreed to pay for them."

"Beggars can't be choosers, you know. The scamps had me on the hip and I was obliged to knuckle," the Fresh replied. Besides I would rather give fifty than lose the weapons, for they are like old pards; I have carried them for a long time, they never went back on me, and I know they can be depended upon."

"It is goot! I will take particular care to speak to all my peddlers about them," the Jew remarked with the air of a man who desired to be particularly agreeable.

"There isn't any doubt you will be able to recover the pistols for fifty dollars is a goot price for old revolvers; but did I not understand you to say you had a diamond on which you wished to raise money?"

"Yes, here it is," and the Fresh took off the ring and handed it to the Jew.

Old Solomons examined it in a critical manner.

"It is a fair stone and were it not for the flaw would be worth some monish," he remarked.

"Why, you old sinner, where do you find a flaw in it?"

"Here in the side!" responded the pawnbroker in the most positive way, holding up the ring for the sport's inspection.

"There's no flaw in that diamond and you know it, you old scamp!"

"Oh, mine gootness, mine fr'en', you must not think to deceive a goot judge like myself!" declared the Jew.

"Child of Moses! if there's a flaw in that stone I will eat it—and between you and me and the bedpost, I am not hankering after diamonds for dinner just now. A less costly repast will satisfy my appetite!"

"Mebbe you are not of diamonds a judge."

"I am as good a judge as you are, Hadad, old pard, and I reckon that is saying a good deal."

"I am a sport and when I am flush my fancy naturally runs to diamonds. I have owned a good many sparklers in my time, and I flatter myself I can tell a good stone when I see it as well as any jeweler in the land."

"And now I will tell you what I will do. Is there any man in El Paso whom you consider to be a good judge of diamonds?"

"Oh, yes, Senor Jose Parral, captain of police."

"He is a judge?"

"No better in Mexico!" replied the Jew, decidedly. "He was brought up in one of the largest jewelry shops in the city of Mexico."

"Good, I am willing to leave it to him. I will put up the ring against twenty-five dollars of your money. If there is a flaw in the stone you to take money and ring, but if there isn't I to corral the spoils."

"Ab, but this would be gambling!" the pawnbroker protested. "I am an honest business man and I never gamble."

"Particularly when you haven't any chance to win, eh? Come, old man, you know very well that the stone is all right and easily worth a hundred and a quarter!"

Finding that he was dealing with a man who knew something about diamonds, the pawnbroker pretended to submit the diamond to another careful inspection, and then, shaking his head in a dubious way, remarked:

"I believe you are right—I think I was deceived by a shadow. How much do you want on this ring?"

"Well, I ought to have fifty dollars."

"Oh, mine gootness!" and the old Jew threw up his hands in pretended horror; "and you call yourself a judge of diamonds."

"So I am, and that is only about a third of the retail value of the stone."

"I could not do more than ten on it," and the pawnbroker made a motion to hand the ring back; he had no idea of doing it, though, and surrendered it quite unwillingly when the sport took it from him.

"Oh, no, you want the whole butt-end of the bargain."

"Mine fr'en' I must live!" the Jew protested.

"No particular need of that, as far as I can see," the Fresh responded. "I reckon the world would get along just as well without you."

"Well, what will you do on these revolvers?" and the Fresh exhibited them.

"Well, mine fr'en', as it is you I will go you five dollars."

"I want ten!"

"Oh, no, I could not get my monish out of them if you did not take them up."

"Go long with you!" cried the Fresh in contempt. "What is the use of trying to stuff me with any such yarn as that."

"You know very well that you haven't got a revolver in your stock—no matter how old or poor a weapon it is—that you would be willing to sell for less than five dollars."

"Oh, mine gootness, pistols are a drug in the market now."

"Yes, when you want to buy them; they are

dear enough, though, at the selling time. I want ten dollars for the revolvers and forty dollars for the ring."

"Oh, mine gootness—fifty dollars!"

"Yes, an even fifty dollar note is what I am hankering after."

"I cannot give it; it would be robbing myself."

"All right—we can't trade," and the Fresh turned upon his heel.

"Hold on—hold on, mine fr'en'; do not be in so great a hurry!" the old Jew inquired. "Will not less than fifty dollars do?"

"Nary cent."

"It must be fifty?"

"Fifty exactly; no more, no less."

"Mine goot fr'en', will you pardon the question?" asked the Jew, in his most insinuating manner. "What for do you wish this monish?"

"Oh, I haven't the least objection to answering?" the sport replied, immediately.

"As a man of observation I have been struck with the fact that there are more gambling dens in El Paso than I ever saw in a town of the same size, and as a moral man, I have made up my mind to go in and clean out about a dozen of the biggest ones."

"On fifty dollars, cash capital?" asked the old Hebrew, with a sly chuckle.

"Yes, that is my game."

"And you are a sport, eh?" said the pawn-broker, in a tone which implied that he had considerable doubt in regard to the fact.

"Yes, sir, a sport from Sportville."

"Mine gootness! the boys will clean you out so quickly that it will make your head swim. How long do you want the money?"

"Until to-morrow only."

"Oh!"

"And I'll give you five dollars for the use of it."

"You shall have it, my fr'en'!" cried the Jew, abruptly, with a flourish of his skinny hand in the air.

"I like pluck! You have more sand than any man that has struck El Paso since the flood, but the boys will skin you all the same and you will never see your sparkler and your revolvers again."

"Don't you be too sure of that. I'm the biggest chief on the Rio Grande and my 'medicine' is mighty powerful. I always play to win."

"I hope so, but you will not all the same."

Then the Jew produced the fifty-dollar note and "gathered in" the ring and the revolvers.

"So-long, I will see you later!" the Fresh remarked.

"It will be no use to come without the monish!" responded the Jew.

"Don't you worry about that! Wrap 'em up in lavender!"

CHAPTER XIV.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

"WA-AL, you are the fu'st man, I reckon, that ever made that ole galoot of a Jew come to time!" California Joe remarked.

"It all depends upon knowing how to handle your man," the Fresh replied.

"He bit like a hungry fish when I offered the bait of only wanting the money for a day."

"Oh, yes, that was plain erneuf."

"Well, now, a day is all I want, for I will either make my stake before the winning breaks or else go bu'sted."

"The old cuss was right about one thing though," California Joe remarked as they turned from the side street into the plaza.

"What was that?"

"Fifty dollars ain't much money for a man to have at his back when he goes in to tackle a big game."

"Men have started in with less money and broke big faro banks—the game was a square one though, and all that the bank had in its favor was the natural percentage."

"I myself, in 'Frisco once, started in with ten dollars and came out a winner, twenty thousand to the good."

"Thunderation!" cried the old scout, astonished at the magnitude of the sum, "that was a terrible big haul."

"I should reckon that when a man corralled a sum like that, he would feel a good deal like salting the bulk of it down for a rainy day."

"Old pard, if you will only consider the creed of the sport you will see that such a thing as that is impossible to ninety-nine out of every hundred."

"The true sharp reckons not of the future; in his anticipations the sun always shines—the thought that clouds and gloom are sure to come never enters his mind, and if one, more thoughtful than his fellows does ever think that in the future he may need the wealth which he has won so easily and is squandering so lavishly, he generally contents himself with saying, well, the very next big strike I make I will put a good part of it away in some safe investment, but as I said, ninety-nine out of a hundred never do it."

"Durned if it ain't 'bout the same way with us, ole mountain-men!" California Joe declared as the thought suddenly occurred to him.

"Thar ain't more than one out of a hundred of us that ever has sense enuff to put by anything when we air flush, and arter a long trip we allers strike civilization with big money, you know."

"Yes; the old adage, 'easy got, easy gone,' is a mighty true one, although it ought not to apply to you mountain-men, for not only is your work generally pretty hard but you risk your blood and lives besides."

"Yes, but we never take that into consideration, you know; most generally it is kinder like a picnic to us."

"But now to business," the Fresh observed, coming to a halt.

"Since we are going into battle, we must arrange the plan of the campaign."

"I see that these gaming-places seem to be all running and 'doing a pretty good business, too, considering that that sort of thing always flourishes best by night."

"Yes, but El Paso is on a reg'lar boom now," the old scout explained.

"These stock-ranches on both sides of the river—both on American and Mexican side—have been making big money for the last year or so, and the result is, that thar has been the biggest kind of an emigration to this part of the country, and every man who could raise a stake has rushed to El Paso to slap it into cattle, for this is the headquarters of the business."

"I tell you, pard, the town is a young metropolis now to what it was five or six years ago. These fellows are all pretty flush of money, and while they are loafing 'round hyer waiting for a chance to invest, it is the most natural thing in the world for them to try a flier at some one of the games."

"Very natural. I have been there myself," the Fresh observed.

"Is there any game in town that has the reputation of being perfectly square?"

"Oh, yes; Doc Moses's."

"A Jew, eh?"

"Yes, I suppose so; but he is the most Christian Jew you ever saw—a great, tall fellow, with a long brown beard. Joe Moses is his full name. He runs the biggest game in town, and is as squar' as a die, so they all allow. Don't play nothing but faro in his place, though, while in the other ones you kin try a hack at almost anything, from faro and monte to chuck-a-luck."

"And where is the man who says that game is getting scarce at the approach of civilization?"

"He never struck El Paso, for sure!"

"And are all the rest of the fellows wolves and sharks, with the exception of this Doc Moses?"

"I reckon they air; they air working a new thing which ketches the boys every time," California Joe explained.

"I reckon I ought to know, seeing that it gobbled up all my wealth. It is a sort of a wheel with a marble; the wheel spins out until finally the marble rests in one of the sort of pockets that thar is in the durned thing."

"You put your money in one of the pockets, and if the marble stops thar, you win—"

"And if it don't, the bank gathers in the ducats."

"Correct, by thunder!"

"That is an old game."

"It ain't been run long in this section. 'Bout every shebang in town has got one, 'cept Doc Moses, and the boys have been bucking up ag'in' them like fun!"

"And to the profit of the bank, I suppose?"

"Yes, it seems all fair and squar', but the durned wheel: corral the wealth so that the boys are kinder beginning to git the idee into their noodles that thar must be some gum-game 'bout the business, somehow."

"I shouldn't be surprised, for I have heard old gamblers say—men who ran the wheels themselves and were posted—when there were plenty of players more cheating could be done with the wheels than at almost any other game."

"I reckon they have been trying something of that kind on hyar," California Joe remarked in a tone of conviction.

"I am dead sure that the durned wheels cleaned me out."

"I will try and get you your revenge, for that is the very game I want to strike."

"Sho! you don't mean it!" cried the old mountain-man amazed.

"I do indeed; I am going in to skin the wolves, you know, and I reckon the wheel fellows are the biggest wolves in the town."

"Those are the kind of fellows that I am after; I am going to win 'by trick and device,' as the legal sharps say, and I should hate like thunder to skin any square sporting man, who is content to live on the fair advantage possessed by the bank; but when it comes to wolves who do their best to fleece their customers, then if I go for them in a way they will despise why it is only dog eat dog."

"Sart'in, you bet!" cried the old plainsman, emphatically.

"What is sass for the goose ought to be sass for the gander!"

"That is the way I figure it."

"Now then, where is some minor strap, not one of the big places, for me to tackle first?"

"Right across the street, Mexican Mike's Ranch, and they do say he is the meanest cuss in the town for no stranger gets a square deal thar, if a brace game can be worked."

"He's the man for my money then!"

The two crossed the plaza and entered the saloon indicated by California Joe.

It was a medium-sized place, bar-room and gambling saloon combined, and the principal game was the wheel one of which the old scout had spoken.

There was a group of loungers in the room, five or six of whom were playing.

The Fresh surveyed the game for a few minutes, studying the thing just as if it was new to him and he had never encountered it before.

Then he drew a bill from his pocket, crumpled it up in a ball and placed it in one of the pockets of the wheel.

The marble went on its course, fortune was against the sport and he lost.

Picking up the bill he tossed it over to the banker who smoothed it out, and placed it upon his pile of ones, it being of that denomination.

Then our hero appeared puzzled and did not bet for five or six minutes during which he appeared to be studying the game with great attention.

At last, nodding his head as if he had been debating with himself, and had come to the conclusion that he saw just how the thing was won, he drew another bill from his pocket rolled it up into a ball, just like the first one, and placed it in one of the pockets.

Away went the marble again on its rounds and this time the Fresh won.

"Aha, I knew I would strike it this time!" he cried with all the enthusiasm of a green young man to whom gambling was a novelty.

"Better wait until you git through playing before you crow," suggested the man behind the wheel, smiling in scorn at the greenness of the tenderfoot.

But when he removed the bill from the pocket and smoothed it out, so as to pay over an equal sum, although he had no suspicion but that it was a dollar bill like the first one that the bank had captured, his surprise and disgust can better be imagined than described when he made the discovery that it was a fifty-dollar bill.

"Blazes!" the man could not refrain from growling, old and experienced gambler that he was, and then he glared suspiciously at the supposed tenderfoot, and the Fresh played the part of a verdant young man, overjoyed at his good fortune to the life.

"Why in blazes didn't you say it was a fifty-dollar bill when you put it up on the game?" the fellow growled.

"Why didn't you ask me? How did I know?" responded the Fresh with an air of virtuous indignation.

"You only bet a dollar the first time!"

"Just to get the hang of the thing—I knew I could skin you the second try and that is the reason I put up half-a-century."

"But what is the matter with you? Didn't I win the money fairly enough?" demanded the sport, beginning to bluster.

"Yes, yes, you did!" exclaimed three or four of the players, delighted at the "strike."

"I ain't saying you didn't."

"Cash up then!" cried the Fresh, briskly. "And, if it is all the same to you, give me that hundred dollar bill there in place of two fifties."

"All right, anything to accommodate," responded the banker, still rather sulky.

He handed over the bill and the Fresh immediately began rolling it up in a little ball.

CHAPTER XV.

SKINNING MORE WOLVES.

THE banker watched the sharp engaged in this operation for a moment and then called out:

"Hallo, I say, what are you about?"

"Why, I am rolling this shinplaster up into a little ball; don't you see?"

"Oh, yes, I see," the other observed in an extremely sulky way. "I reckon I ain't lost the use of my eyes yet, but that ain't the p'nt I'm getting at. What are you going to do with that ball arter you git it fixed?"

"Plank it right down in your game, you bet your life!" cried the Fresh.

"Not much you don't!" exclaimed the other.

"You don't take my hundred dollars out of me if I know myself. Enough is as good as a feast, and I reckon I've got all I want of you. You can't bet no hundred dollars in this game."

"Ahal! you crawfish, do you? You havn't got the sand to stand the pull? Well, well, I am really astonished. I thought you had more backbone. Sport, I wouldn't have believed you could be bluffed so easily!"

"That ain't neither hyer nor thar," replied the keeper of the gaming-saloon, angrily. "It don't matter the wag of a goat's tail whether I have got any sand or not. I don't keer to have you back me for any hundred dollars, and that is all there is to it!"

"How much will you stand? Will you go fifty?"

"No, I won't, not from you—I don't keer to have you play at my table any more, anyway!"

"Do you mean to insinuate that there was anything crooked about my playing?" the Fresh demanded.

"No, I don't go for to say that, for if I thought that was I would hop in to make mince-meat out of you quicker'n a wink!" And the gambler glared fiercely at the Californian as he spoke.

"Sport, I am always ready to meet any man who is hankering for a fight more than half-way!" the Fresh declared. "And if you really want a little amusement in that line to keep your blood stirring, all you have to do is to come outside and I will do my best to accommodate you."

The bystanders watched the scene with interest, for the gambler was known to be an ugly customer and all expected he would accept the stranger's challenge.

But the "banker" was an old hand—a man of judgment, and after carefully "sizing the stranger up," he came to the conclusion he could not profit by engaging in a contest with him, so he got out of it as gracefully as possible.

"Oh, I ain't a-going 'round picking fusses with anybody!" he exclaimed.

"My little game is to make money, not to help fill up graveyards," continued the sport, with an endeavor to appear humorous.

"And I ain't got any idea of giving offense when I say that I had rather a gent of your size shouldn't play at my table."

"You are running in big luck; I kin see that with half an eye, and I would rather you wouldn't play hyer."

"Go skin some other bank! there are plenty of sports in town who can far better afford to go broke than a man about my size, meaning no offense to you, you know."

"Oh, that is all right," the Fresh replied, with a polite bow. "I am not anxious to fling my money on any table where the owner isn't just hungry for a chance to get at it."

"There are plenty of other shops in this town of El Paso where the banker will be glad to see the color of my ducats, so I will bid you good-day."

The gambler forced a smile and nodded pleasantly as the Fresh and Old California Joe took their departure, but in his heart he registered an oath to "get square" with the stranger sport some day if he remained in the town.

"Now, then, having made the ripple successfully at this shebang, I must strike at bigger game."

"Red Sancho's place is a heap sight more first class than this galoot's dive," the other remarked.

"We will go for Red Sancho then," the sharp exclaimed.

"Thar it is," and California Joe pointed to an imposing-looking saloon a short distance up the square.

"That tiger has a fine den," the Fresh remarked, in a critical way.

"You bet! that is the bang-up place of the town, with the exception of Doc Moses's."

"And do they run the wheel game in there?"

"Oh, yes, just the same as in this place."

"That is what I am after."

The two proceeded to the saloon.

It was much larger than the first place they visited, and far better patronized.

After entering California Joe pointed out the proprietor to his companion.

Red Sancho was a tall, well-built man, with a bushy red beard, and from his appearance no one meeting him outside of his gaming-den would have been apt to suspect the nature of his business, for he looked more like a well-to-do farmer than the keeper of a gambling-house.

Red Sancho was not presiding at any of the tables, but sauntering around, keeping a general supervision over matters, and chatting with his patrons.

The two new-comers made their way to the table where the wheel of fortune was in motion, and, after watching the progress of the game for a few moments, the Fresh drew a bill from his pocket-book, crumpled it into a ball, and staked it upon the game.

Fortune favored our hero, and he won.

With his forefinger he sent the paper ball rolling toward the banker, and that worthy, upon opening it, was considerably astonished to discover that it was a hundred dollar note.

The circumstance also made the bystanders open their eyes, for it was not often that a player ventured more than ten dollars upon the chances of the game.

The Fresh put his money away in his wallet, and did not let for a few minutes, seemingly occupied in calculations, then he repeated his former proceeding.

Again the bill, crumpled into a ball, was placed upon the wheel, and again the Fresh won. This time the banker was not surprised when he opened the note and found that it was a hundred dollar one.

The bystanders were amazed, for this, in their opinion, was an astonishing run of luck.

Again the Fresh refrained from betting for a few moments, yet apparently studying the game deeply, and this proceeding convinced the lookers-on that he was playing according to a "system" which he had studied out, and one and all set their brains to work to discover the secret.

Again the Fresh ventured his stake, and again he won—another hundred dollars out of the bank.

By this time the report that a stranger was making big winnings had circulated throughout the room, and the majority of the men within the apartment gathered near to the table upon which spun the wheel, eager to witness the play and anxious to discover how the trick was worked.

"Mighty big run of luck, stranger," observed a grizzled bearded cattleman at the Californian's side, who had been risking dollar bills for a good half-hour without being able to boast of having won a stake.

"Yes, and it is about time it changed," the Fresh replied with an air of deep reflection, like a man who had, and was, devoting deep thought to the matter.

"Guess I will have to go a little slow now for a few hacks."

The majority of the bystanders understood from this that the sport intended to give up playing for awhile, but after a few revolutions of the wheel, the Fresh again deposited a bill, crumpled into a ball, upon the wheel.

The bystanders were not amazed when the stake was lost, for it would be an astonishing thing for a man to win four times in succession.

"Well, that's a hundred back any way," the banker remarked, as he proceeded to smooth out the bill.

"All you have to do, stranger, is to keep on playing, and you will blow all your winnings in."

"Oh, no, nary hundred. I know a trick worth two of that," the Fresh responded.

And there was a general "snicker" at this moment for the bill which the Fresh had lost was only a one.

A single dollar instead of a hundred.

"Didn't I tell you that I was going to go slow for a while?" the Californian exclaimed.

And then there was another laugh, for all of the bystanders regarded the gamblers with little favor and they were glad to see a player get the best of the sharps.

By this time the attention of the proprietor, Red Sancho was attracted and he approached the table to see what was going on.

Again the Fresh made his bet and, as before, luck went against him; the bank won, but the cashier was not astonished this time when he examined the bill and found that it was a dollar note only.

A third time the Fresh lost—a dollar again, and then with the remark that it was about time that luck changed our hero bet again.

He seemed to speak with the lips of a prophet for fortune favored him this time, and it was with a deal of exultation that he picked up the paper ball and tossed it over to the cashier.

"There, didn't I tell you that it was about time for me to have some show for my money?" the winner exclaimed, exultingly.

"I reckon you are making considerable fuss 'bout a dollar!" the cashier observed with a sneer as he proceeded to unroll the bill.

"A dollar! what are you talking about? That's a hundred, and that is the kind of man I am!"

It was the truth, much to the disgust of the gambler and the delight of the bystanders.

Red Sancho was completely puzzled and he watched the money passed into the Fresh's possession with the air of a man dazed by a heavy blow.

Then a sudden idea came to him and he exclaimed:

"Stranger, I reckon you are a sharper!"

CHAPTER XVI. BEARDING THE TIGER.

THE attention of every man in the room was attracted by the loud tone in which the proprietor of the gambling saloon spoke; he was known to be a desperate man when roused, and all who were acquainted with the man's disposition guessed immediately that, angered by the wonderful success of the stranger, he intended to pick a quarrel with him.

"You reckon I am a sharper, eh?" the Fresh queried, smiling in the most good-natured way possible, just as if he regarded the remark in the light of a compliment.

"Yes, that is what I said!" exclaimed Red Sancho loudly, and in an extremely offensive way.

"Well, I reckon there is a pair of us; you are sharp and I am sharper, ha, ha, ha!" and our hero laughed outright.

"About four hundred dollars' worth sharper, I reckon, as near as I can figure it."

There was a chorus of chuckles from the mouths of the bystanders, for there was hardly a man in the room who did not enjoy seeing the redoubtable Red Sancho bearded in his den.

The brow of the Mexican grew black with rage.

Personally he appeared to be a much bigger man than the Fresh, for, as the reader who has followed the fortunes of Jackson Blake through the tales of which he is the hero will remember, the Fresh was an extremely deceptive man as far as looks went, and until he was stripped, so his true proportions could be seen, appeared to be a much smaller man than he really was.

"Caramba! do you dare to taunt me to my face?" the gambler cried.

"Why not to your face as well as to the face of any other man in the town?" demanded the Fresh, presenting a bold front.

"Who are you, anyway! Are you the boss of El Paso that you try to carry matters with so high a hand?"

"You Gringo dog I will crush you to the earth beneath my feet and trample the life out of you!" shouted the thoroughly enraged Mexican, and he made a leap forward with the intention of bearing the daring stranger to the ground by sheer force.

The Fresh, warned by the glitter in the eye of the other that he meditated an attack, was prepared for the onset.

He did not give an inch as the swarthy Mexican rushed upon him, but, collecting all his force, dealt him a most terrific blow which resounded through the room with a sharp whip-like crack.

The powerful Mexican went over backward, his head striking the floor with great violence, and there he lay limp and still.

"The man is dead!" cried one of the bystanders, horrified.

"Oh, no, nothing of the kind!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"He's worth a dozen dead men! He has only been knocked out in the first round. Richard will be himself again in a minute or two."

The moment he disposed of his opponent the Fresh clapped his hands upon his revolver and Old California Joe followed his example.

The same idea had simultaneously occurred to both of the men, and that was that some of the Mexican's gang might attempt to avenge their leader's downfall.

Undoubtedly some such attempt would have been made but for the fact that all of Red Sancho's assistants were Mexicans, men who were brave enough in their way, but not such desperadoes as to be inclined to rush to certain death.

Their first impulse, naturally, was to rush upon the bold stranger and avenge the defeat of their leader, but when they noticed that the victor was armed and began to finger his weapons the moment after he had stretched Red Sancho upon the floor, prudence whispered that the unknown might be equally as handy with his pistol as with his fists, and it would not be wise for them to rush upon him.

They noted too the presence of the plainsman, Old California Joe, saw that he was ready for a skirmish, and understood that as he was in company with the successful player he would undoubtedly stand by him in the event of an attack.

Then, too, the majority of the men in the saloon were Americans, and they would be likely to take the part of their countryman if a general attack was made upon him.

So, under the circumstances, the Mexicans contented themselves with scowling in the fiercest possible manner, but made no movement.

As the Fresh had stated, Red Sancho had simply been "knocked out," and soon his senses returned to him.

He rose slowly to his feet, glaring upon the man, who had prostrated him so easily, with the look of a demon.

The blow of the American had fallen right between the eyes of the Mexican, and, as a result, he now possessed as fine a pair of black eyes as mortal man ever displayed.

The Mexican was so enraged that he fairly trembled with passion, yet he had sense enough not to try another attack with his fists upon the foe who had beaten him so easily.

Still he hungered for revenge.

He was an expert with all kinds of weapons, and now that he took time to reflect upon the matter he saw how rash he had been in attempting to meet the "Gringo" in a fist-fight bout.

The Americans were all fist-fighters, it seemed to come natural to them, but the Mexicans looked with disdain upon such an accomplishment.

It was no wonder then, in Red Sancho's opinion, that the unknown had triumphed over him so easily.

But the matter was not yet ended.

"Are you a man—dare you come out into the street and face me revolver in hand?" the gambler cried.

"Do I dare!" the Fresh exclaimed. "Well, now you can bet your bottom dollar I dare. In fact, I am old Dare's son, from Dareville, and when you talk six or seven-shooters to me you are catching me right on my best bolt."

"I'm the pistol prince, I am; the champion of California, and with the revolver I don't take a back seat for any man this side of sun-down!"

For a moment Red Sancho looked puzzled, for

the stranger rattled off the speech with the air of a man who hadn't an idea that he had been challenged to mortal combat.

But then the Mexican had encountered some of these "crazy" Americans before, for so the yellow-skinned inhabitants of the land of Mexico termed these strangers who acted in such an incomprehensible manner, and he remembered that many of them were both free and loud of speech.

His adversary was only acting as many of his countrymen were wont to act when the strong drinks of the land of flowers mounted to their heads and obscured their reason.

But, as far as this stranger was concerned, there wasn't anything in his appearance to denote that he had been drinking.

Red Sancho's blood was in a flame though he did all he could to control his temper, for he realized that the stranger was no common foe and that he must exert all his powers to conquer him.

"I will soon give you a chance to show what you can do with your weapon!" the Mexican cried.

"Follow me to the plaza where we can fight without danger of injuring any one but ourselves and we will soon see what kind of a man you are with the pistol."

"The best that ever struck this town, and don't you forget it!" the Fresh declared in his confident way.

"Follow me and we will put your boast to the test!" the Mexican cried.

"I will take a position in the center of the plaza, fifty feet away; you shall have time to get ready after you are out and then it is a duel to the death."

"That suits me to a hair!" the other declared. "And if I don't put a brand on you that will last till your dying day then my name is not Jackson Blake and folks lie when they call me the Fresh of 'Frisco."

The odd appellation made the bystanders open their eyes, and there were some few old pilgrims in the room who had heard the name before, and although they had never met the bearer of the title, yet they knew of him by reputation.

Soon the whisper went around that this stranger, who had not hesitated to beard the tiger in his den, was one of the greatest fighting men that the Pacific Slope ever turned out.

Red Sancho marched forth into the street, the witness to the affair followed, Old California Joe and the Fresh of 'Frisco bringin' up the rear.

The Mexican took a position in the middle of the open space, about a hundred feet from his saloon, and while he was doing this all the spectators sought good situations from which to view the contest, keeping in view the fact that in the usual street fight the lookers-on are generally exposed to as much danger as contestants, if they are not wise enough to get at a good distance from the fighters.

Just as the Mexican got to his position and turned around, revolver in hand, the Fresh made his appearance.

He too marched out into the center of the street and then halted.

The two men were about fifty feet apart.

The spectators looked on in almost breathless eagerness.

"Are you ready?" cried Red Sancho, eager for the blood of his foe.

"You bet!" responded the Fresh, drawing his gun.

"Let her go, Gallagher."

And then he started on a run toward his antagonist.

The Mexican was so startled by this unexpected maneuver that he became nervous, particularly as the Fresh ran in a zigzag way, serpent-like.

He had never encountered such a foe, and the peculiar movement "rattled" him.

Almost before he knew what he was about he discharged his weapon.

The shot whistled harmlessly over the head of the sport and then his revolver spoke.

Down went Red Sancho with a bullet through the chest—not a mortal wound, but an extremely ugly one.

The fight was ended—the Fresh of 'Frisco's first contest in El Paso—and he had "laid out" his man.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN ADVANCE OF DOC MOSES.

A LONG breath escaped from the lips of the spectators and then the hum of conversation rose on the air.

Each man was asking his neighbor if he ever saw any "sich circus" settled so quickly.

The fight was over almost before it began, contrary to the expectation of every one, for one and all expected a long and bloody battle.

There was a dead pause after the Mexican fell, for none of the bystanders were ready to believe that so desperate a man as Red Sancho could be thus easily "knocked out," but when the desperado, instead of rising to renew the battle, remained upon the ground, and the pain of his wound caused him to groan aloud, despite his efforts to conceal his sufferings, all realized that the fight was over.

Three of the Mexican's pards ran to his assistance.

"How is it with you?" asked the first who reached his side.

"I am done for, I fear," groaned the wounded man. "This cursed Gringo has slain me," and then the desperado fainted.

The three Mexicans looked for a moment at the prostrate form of their leader, then they glared at the American and began to finger their weapons.

The Fresh was within thirty feet of them and could plainly distinguish, not only their movement but the expressions upon their faces, so he was quick to see that the ruffians had an idea of attempting to revenge the death of their leader.

The threatening movement of the Mexicans was observed by the majority of the bystanders too and nearly every one of the Americans at once reached for his weapons, determined that their countryman should have a fair show.

But the reader who knows the Fresh of 'Frisco of old will immediately comprehend that the odds of three to one had no terrors for him, particularly when the foemen were Mexicans, a race for whom he had little respect.

"Well, my bold Greasers, are you going to take this thing up?" the Fresh exclaimed, in a tone which did not betray that he had the slightest fear of such a contest.

"If so, you can hop in as soon as you like!"

"One good solid American such as I am, ought to be a match for about a dozen of you yellow-bellies!"

This was adding insult to injury, and with a howl of rage the Mexican desperadoes drew their revolvers.

The Fresh had a decided advantage in having his weapon already out, and he only waited until his opponents got their pistols out of their holsters before he opened fire upon them.

And the marvelous quickness of his movements surprised the spectators, although there were some old frontiersmen in the group who could boast of having seen some wonderful fights in their time.

But not a man of them all could say with truth that he ever beheld a man "handle" himself better than did Jackson Blake on this occasion.

He was so quick with his weapon that he fired three shots to one from his opponents.

But a single Mexican got a chance to discharge his weapon, the other two being shot down before they could get their pistols to the level, and the third man was so "rattled" by the discomfiture of his companions that his aim was disturbed, the bullet not coming within a foot of the Fresh, and the firing of Jackson Blake's third shot was so near this discharge that it seemed like an echo to it.

Down went the Mexican with a scream of pain.

This wonderful stranger was evidently a dead-shot, for he wasted no powder, dropping his man every time.

Again had he proved the victor, and this time not a soul was brave enough to advance to take up the quarrel, although there were a number of Mexicans among the bystanders who were terribly enraged at the downfall of their countrymen.

"Well, is the circus over?" the Fresh queried, with an inquiring look around.

"Is there any other galoots here anxious to hop in and have some fun?"

The bystanders looked at each and every American who was in the neighborhood of a Mexican, nodded to him as much as to say, "there's a chance for you, go it!" but the dark-skinned Dons, much as they would have liked to crush the stranger who had handled their brethren so roughly, were not anxious to test the powers of the "Gringo," after the display which they had witnessed.

"No one cares to accept the invitation to the picnic, then," the Fresh observed, after a pause.

"All right; I am agreeable; I am not banker- ing after any trouble, although always ready to meet it when it comes."

By this time the bystanders had gathered in a group on the battle-field.

"I reckon you have settled the hash of some of these fellows, one gray-bearded old veteran observed.

"Oh, no, they are all right—every man-Jack of them," the Fresh replied, immediately.

"I did not fire to kill. I only wanted to lay them out as a warning that it isn't always safe to fool with a stranger until you get a chance to be introduced to him, so as to be able to find out what kind of a man he is, you know."

"If I had wanted to put these fellows in a condition for planting, I would have plugged them squarely between the eyes. When a man once gets a leaden pill in that place he is never of much good afterward."

"So-long, gentlemen, I will see you later," and then in company with California Joe, the Fresh went up the plaza to where the lights of Doc Moses's saloon shone brilliantly upon the street.

Quite a number of the citizens followed the pair, for they had got the notion into their heads that when such a man as the Fresh of

'Frisco was to the front there would be apt to be some fun.

On the way the Fresh made known his plans to his companion.

"You say that this Doc Moses runs a square game?"

"That is the lay-out that the boyees give him," the old plainsman answered.

"I don't pretend to know much 'bout that ar' sort of thing, although I have dropped many a dollar at a faro table in my time, but the galoots w'ot make a living out of the pasteboards—the fellers w'ot hev their eye-teeth cut, you know—waal, they say that a man can't strike no fairer game than Doc Moses's from sunrise to sun-

"As I said, many a dollar hev I dropped on the game, and yet I ain't worth shucks as a player; mebbe that is the reason why I allers had sich bad luck, although I have heered some sharps allow that the less a man knew about faro, the better chance he stood to win a pile of money."

"Those sharps wasn't so sharp as they thought themselves, or they would never have talked in that foolish way," the Fresh remarked.

"The man who is able to calculate the chances and plays systematically, knowing all the points of the game, has as much advantage over the novice, who plays with blind recklessness, at faro as at almost any other game."

"That's the way it allers seemed to me, and I never took no stock in any sich loose talk."

"In all games luck counts, of course. Men may say that in the long run, luck runs even with all men, but you can't convince any ancient gambler that that is true, for they have seen too many lucky men in their time to believe the statement.

"Some men are lucky at cards and others always unlucky, but a good player will more than hold his own against a bad one, even if luck favors the latter, for he knows how to improve the opportunities when they come to him and the other doesn't."

"Now, without boasting, I may say that I am not only a pretty skillful player at almost all the games that are going, but I am also lucky, to say nothing of being up to all the tricks of the trade. So, if this faro game is a square one I am not at all afraid of tackling it, particularly as I am now well-heeled, financially, thanks to the little game I played to beat these wolves."

"For our enterprise, we ought to have a couple of thousand dollars at our back, for the more I think about the matter the greater becomes my conviction that we have tackled the biggest kind of a job."

"That's so. I reckon thar ain't no mistake 'bout that," his companion assented.

"But I say, pard, I'm awful curious—how on airth did you manage to skin these sharps, 'cos I reckon you played some gum-game onto 'em."

"Oh, yes, it was dog eat dog," the Fresh replied, with a smile.

"Those wheels are a skin-game, all through, the way these sharks run them, and so I considered it fair to play roots on them. I put down the big note every time. If I lost, when I picked it up to toss it to the dealer I 'palmed' the ball, as a sleight-of-hand man would say, and substituted the one-dollar bill for it; but if I won, the galoot got the big note."

"You see, I was playing on a dead-sure thing every time. If I won, it was fifty or a hundred to the good every lick; if I lost, I was only a dollar out."

The old plainsman looked amazed.

"Durn my old gizzard if that don't beat all the games I ever heerd on!" he declared. "But it's a dodge that mighty few men would be able to work."

"Right you are! A man must be mighty clever with his fingers, or all the fat would be in the fire."

By this time the two had arrived at Doc Moses's saloon.

The "game" was in full blast when they entered.

The Fresh watched the play for about twenty minutes before he ventured any money, being bent on satisfying his mind as to whether the players were getting a "square deal" or not.

Satisfied at last that the game was run on the square, our hero bought his chips and began to play.

He was an expert and played on a system, as the sports soon discovered.

Luck favored him, too, and inside of three hours he had captured over fifteen hundred of the "bank's" cash.

"Say, just cash up these checks," he said, blandly. "It is about time for me to quit, for I should hate like thunder to break the bank and spoil the fun."

Glad enough were the faro sharps to see him depart.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HEIRESS OF ESCOBEDO.

AND now that we have related how the enterprising Fresh of 'Frisco prospered in his attempt to raise money, so he would be able to pursue the marauding band known as the Red Riders of Rayon in a proper manner, we will return to

the passengers in the coach, and relate what befell them after the stage was driven so uncircumstantially away from the spot where it had been halted by the outlaws.

"Well, I must say this is a most remarkable adventure!" Isabel Escobedo exclaimed, after the coach was fairly in motion.

"Yes, and it is fortunate that the road-agents were disposed to be so easy with us," Mr. Jackson remarked.

"They were quite gallant to allow you ladies to go free. As a rule, these robbers spare neither age nor sex."

"We were fortunate indeed, then; don't you think so, Margaret?" asked the vivacious Isabel.

"Oh, yes, although we haven't much to lose, for we do not carry much money, and our jewelry is not particularly valuable," Margaret replied.

"That is true, but I am sure I should have been frightened almost to death if the men had insisted upon our getting out and giving up our money and jewelry!" Isabel exclaimed.

"We may thank our stars that we have got off so easily," Mr. Jackson remarked. "I didn't care much, for I am an old traveler and I make it a rule never to take any more valuables with me on a trip of this kind than I can keep, for there's no telling when an event of this kind may happen."

For a few minutes the three conversed in this strain in regard to the affair, and then the conversation was interrupted by the abrupt halting of the coach.

Again the Red Riders appeared at the doors.

Isabel gave a little scream, Margaret became deathly pale, while Jackson appeared decidedly uneasy.

"I am sorry, ladies, to be obliged to disturb you," said one of the disguised outlaws in a rough, harsh voice, "but the captain wants to speak to you on some important business and I am obliged to ask you to get out of the stage."

This was not the marauder who had done the talking on the previous occasion but a big brawny fellow, a larger man in every way.

"Oh, dear, what shall we do?" exclaimed Isabel, with an appealing look to the stockman.

"I would comply with the gentleman's request," Mr. Jackson hastened to say. "I don't think there is the least danger of their attempting to harm you."

"Oh, no you'll be all right!" the ruffian remarked.

"The captain only wants to talk to you, and you will be just as safe as though you were in the middle of El Paso."

"Well, sir, I hope so, and I don't see what anybody could possibly gain by injuring us," Isabel observed, as she prepared to descend from the stage.

"Oh, you're all right! Don't you worry!" exclaimed the masked rider, who, having dismounted, stood at the coach door and assisted the ladies to descend.

Another of the masked riders was near, on horseback, and he held the reins of two steeds, equipped with the cumbersome Mexican side-saddles.

The moment Isabel was on the ground and beheld the two riderless horses she came to the conclusion that the steeds were intended for the accommodation of herself and Margaret, and she at once made known her surmise.

"Are we to ride these horses?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, the captain wants you to pay him a visit at his ranch. It is only a few miles off and you will be entertained like queens while you are there."

"The captain was a great friend of your father, the old cattle-king," the man continued, addressing Margaret, "and he wants to have a little talk with you in private in regard to your father."

"Quite an adventure!" Isabel continued, gayly, as Margaret looked at her with a perplexed face. "We must go, of course, for I've no doubt these gentlemen wouldn't be willing to take no for an answer."

"That is about the size of it, miss," the outlaw replied.

"Our orders are to bring you, and of course we must obey orders."

"Oh, we will go willingly, will we not, Margaret?" Isabel exclaimed. "For I feel sure you will not harm us, and this gentleman can carry word to the friends who are to come to El Paso to meet us, that we will soon be there, and as we are nearly a week ahead of the time when we expected to arrive, the chances are great that we will be there first."

"Of course I will be glad to do anything to oblige you," the stockman remarked.

"I don't want to hurry you, but the quicker we are off the better," observed the marauder.

"We are ready," responded Isabel, who, being far more forward than her companion, took upon herself to do the talking.

The outlaw assisted the girls to mount the horses, then got upon his own steed, and the party set out, heading to the southward.

The coach went on its way to El Paso, and was soon out of sight.

After the party started, the girls found that they could converse freely together without danger of being overheard, for the Red Rider, who acted as guide, rode a dozen paces in advance, while the other outlaw who was in the rear, was about as far off.

Margaret was full of apprehensions, which the other did not share, for Isabel declared she did not believe there was the least cause to be afraid.

"But why should this outlaw leader wish to see me?" Margaret asked.

"Oh, that is a riddle, of course, which is beyond me," Isabel replied. "But I feel certain that no harm is intended; bold as these outlaws are, they would never dare to injure us."

"I hope so—it seems so, and yet I fear," Margaret replied.

On they rode until the shades of night descended upon the earth, and then at last they entered into the courtyard of a lonely ranch, so situated amid a scattered grove of timber as not to be visible until one was right under the walls.

The ranch was built in the Mexican fashion, with the courtyard in the center, and the entrance to it was guarded by heavy doors, almost strong enough to resist a cannon-ball.

Not a soul was visible, and after the ladies were within the courtyard the Red Rider, who had brought up the rear, carefully closed the heavy doors and turned the ponderous key in the massive lock.

The other outlaw dismounted from his steed and assisted the ladies to alight.

The courtyard was illuminated by a large lantern, hanging over what was evidently the main entrance to the house, so that the party could see what they were about.

"Jest follow me," said the Red Rider, after the girls had alighted.

He conducted them through the portal into the house.

Taking a lighted candle, which was burning in the room, the man led the way into another apartment, which was nicely furnished according to Mexican ideas.

Placing the light upon the table, he bade the ladies make themselves comfortable, saying that his chief would soon pay them a visit and explain matters.

The fellow then departed, and the girls distinctly heard him turn the key in the lock after he closed the door.

"Did you hear that, Isabel?" exclaimed Margaret.

"He has locked the door after him—we are prisoners."

"Of course, that was to be expected," Isabel remarked in the most matter-of-fact tone.

"After taking so much trouble to get us it isn't likely that they are going to allow two such precious birds to slip through their fingers—for want of a little precaution."

"But I cannot understand why these outlaws should wish to make us prisoners," Margaret remarked, sorely troubled by the position in which she found herself.

"That is as great a mystery to me as it is to you," the other observed. "But I do not worry about the matter, for I feel sure that the outlaws cannot intend to do us any real harm."

"Let us be patient, keep up our spirits and give not way to anxiety until we know the worst."

"I will try to follow your advice, but all this is so new and strange to me," Margaret remarked.

"You have been used all your life to this wild, western land, and I can see that such an adventure as this does not produce the impression upon you that it does on me, reared as I have been in the quiet East."

"That is natural of course," the other asserted.

"We western girls are more plucky, I suppose, than you eastern bred maidens, for we see more of life than if shut up in a quiet, humdrum eastern village."

The conversation was interrupted at this point by the grating of the key in the lock.

"Some one is coming!" exclaimed Margaret.

"Yes, and we will probably be able to learn why we have been brought here," Isabel remarked.

The door opened and the Red Rider chief made his appearance.

He bowed in the most polite and respectful manner as he closed the door behind him.

"I trust, ladies, you will excuse the want of ceremony attending your advent here, but, under the circumstances it was unavoidable."

"I have the kindness to be seated, please, so we can converse at our ease."

The ladies complied with the request.

"Pardon me if I also take a chair in your presence," the road-agent chief observed, with another courtly bow.

"Certainly, sir," Isabel replied.

All being seated the outlaw chief hesitated for a moment as if considering how to begin; then at last he said:

"I presume, ladies, you have been considerably puzzled by this move on my part?"

"Yes, sir, replied Isabel, while Margaret simply nodded.

"A few words will explain. From my spies

I learned the names of the passengers in the coach which I had determined to stop. When I found that the heiress of Escobedo was on board, I felt a natural curiosity to behold her. The reality surpassed my imaginings and I became your slave immediately."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE OUTLAW'S PROPOSAL.

THIS was a totally unexpected declaration, and the girls stared in amazement.

The Wild West has always been the land of romance, and this was romantic in the extreme.

"It is one of the oddest things that ever happened to me," the outlaw chief remarked, in a reflective way.

"I will not conceal from you, ladies, that when I planned to attack the coach it was with the purpose of possessing myself of your valuables, for I argued that so rich an heiress as the daughter of the old cattle-king would be apt to have rich booty."

"Indeed, sir, there you are wrong," Margaret hastened to observe. "I have no valuables worth speaking of, and if you had taken them you would have been very poorly paid for your trouble."

"I don't understand how that can be," responded the outlaw chief, in a puzzled way.

"You are the daughter of Estevan Escobedo, and your father was reported to be one of the richest men along the Rio Grande."

"Very true, and I believe there isn't any doubt about it, but if you are acquainted with my history, you must know that my mother quarreled with my father, and went to her former home in the East, taking me with her, when I was only a child."

"Yes, I am acquainted with the circumstance," the outlaw chief observed.

"From the time that my mother left my father up to the time of his death, she steadfastly refused to accept a single penny of his money, but supported herself and me by her own exertions."

"She thought she had been cruelly treated by the man who should have been all in all to her, and nothing short of absolute starvation would have rendered her willing to accept any assistance whatever from him."

"I know some of the facts of the case, and I must say I think your mother was harshly treated, and exhibited a noble spirit," the masked outlaw declared.

"She believed she was acting rightly, and being a thoroughly conscientious woman, never regretted the step she had been forced to take."

"From the time she returned to the East up to the day of my father's death, she never received the slightest aid from him, although, through his lawyers, it was indirectly tendered a dozen times."

"I should have thought that for your sake she might have accepted aid—not for herself, you know, but for you," the outlaw observed.

"She did not need it. Being finely educated, and a thorough business woman, she had no difficulty in obtaining a position in a large establishment which paid her a fine salary, ample for our support, and also to provide me with the education which my mother deemed suitable."

"I see, I see," and the masked man nodded his head, as though he took the deepest interest in the tale.

"In all the years that elapsed since my mother quitted her husband's roof, no word came directly from him until the brief note was received, penned by my father on his death-bed, in which he acknowledged that he had not acted rightly, and said that in requital he had made a will leaving all his property to the child whom he had so neglected."

"Accompanying this note was a letter from my father's lawyer stating that in half an hour after the writing of the note my father died."

"At last justice was done to the woman who had borne her wrong so patiently for so many years."

"But it was too late; my mother's hours were numbered when the news arrived, and within three days she left this world of care."

"I saw the cold earth close over her loved form, and then, in obedience to the lawyer's injunction, I started for the West."

"A draft for one hundred dollars was sent to defray my expenses after I informed the lawyer of my mother's death, so you can easily understand, now that I am near my journey's end, there isn't a great deal left of the original sum."

"That is just like old Judge Bullifant!" the outlaw declared.

"He's a mean old scamp. He ought to have sent you a thousand while he was about it."

"But you can trust him for holding on to a dollar as long as he can."

"I do not know anything about him, of course," Margaret replied, simply.

"Well, I do; he is an infernal old scoundrel, a deuced sight worse in his way than I am in mine."

"I am not so bad a fellow as I might be, for the force of circumstances has made me what I am."

"I come of a good family, one whose members can hold their heads as high as any one in Mex-

ico, but being wild and reckless I fell into bad company, and finally became mixed up with these Red Riders.

"I don't attempt to disguise the fact that I have rebelled against the law, and if the authorities got hold of me I would undoubtedly be severely dealt with, but my sins come from the wild heat of youth, while a man like this old Judge Bullifant commits his crimes with his eyes open, and he is a cunning old scoundrel, too, for he is careful to keep within the law.

"If I stop a stage and hold up the passengers, all the world is ready to cry out in horror, but if a wily scoundrel of a lawyer, by trick and device, manages to swindle some unsuspecting soul, who trusts to his honesty, out of a good, round sum of money, the law winks at the transaction, and the general opinion is that he is an extremely smart man."

"I have heard Judge Bullifant abused," Isabel observed, "but although I have known him a long time, I know nothing to his discredit, except that he is an extremely close man—something of a miser, in fact."

"Yes, when his own money is concerned!" the outlaw exclaimed.

"He is liberal enough with other people's funds, though, as you will find, miss, when you come to pay his bill for taking care of your father's estate.

"In fact, the chances are great that when he gets through with the matter, there will not be much of the property left.

"You are alone and friendless, the judge able and unscrupulous, and there isn't the least doubt he will rob you of every dollar he can get hold of, for that is the kind of man he is."

"You are wrong, sir, in regard to Miss Escobedo being without friends!" exclaimed Isabel, with great dignity, "for I am proud to say that I would do anything in the world for her, and I have a noble brother, who, when he makes her acquaintance and discovers what kind of a girl she is, will be willing to lay down his life for her sake."

"Judge Bullifant will not have everything his own way as soon as my dear brother discovers that his cousin is being wronged."

"I have met your brother Manuel, and I must admit that he is a bold and daring fellow, but he would have a hard task to contend with such a man as Judge Bullifant."

"He is frank, open-hearted and above-board, while the judge is a sly, cunning scoundrel, and in a contest he would not be at all scrupulous in regard to the means he used, and so the chances are great that your brother would only lose his life by attempting to interfere with the old lawyer's game."

"My brother would not hesitate for a moment in espousing the cause of a defenseless girl, no matter how great the odds were against him!" Isabel declared, proudly.

"Oh, yes, that is all very well," the outlaw observed. "But what this lady wants is a man who can make a successful fight against the rascally old lawyer."

"A man like myself, for instance, who can oppose force with force, and cunning with cunning."

"The judge is a man who would not hesitate for a moment to commit murder if he could profit by it."

"Not that he would do the deed himself, for he hasn't courage enough for that, but in this wild region it is the easiest thing in the world to hire desperadoes, who, if you pay them enough, are always ready to shed blood."

"Now, then, in a case of this kind, a man like myself is just the one who is needed. I can give the villainous old lawyer blow for blow, and I am willing to guarantee that my strokes will be harder than his."

"I'll save your property for you, and then, in some distant land where the Red Riders of Rayon have never been heard of we can enjoy the fruits of the victory."

Margaret looked astounded at this strange proposal, while Isabel burst into a loud laugh.

"Upon my word, sir, you have the most novel method of wooing that was ever heard of!" she exclaimed.

"You have torn a leaf from the history of the dark ages, for never in our time was such a thing known!"

"The French have a saying that it is the unexpected that always happens," the road-agent replied, coldly.

"I am aware, of course, that the mode of courtship which I have adopted is not the usual one, but, under the circumstances, it was the only kind I could use. It was this or nothing."

"There is something strange and romantic about this lady's case, take it as you will, and this little scheme of mine is not so much out of the way."

"Well, I don't know about that," Isabel remarked, doubtfully.

"One thing you must give me credit for, anyway," the outlaw observed, "and that is I am thoroughly in earnest and mean business, every time!"

"There isn't any hurry, you know," and the Red Rider chief arose.

"You can have plenty of time to think the matter over. I will keep close watch on Judge

Bullifant, and if he makes any move whatever, I shall know it. And do not be under any apprehensions in regard to yourselves. You shall be treated with the highest possible respect, and I have no doubt that in time you will come to the conclusion that I have made you a pretty fair offer."

And then, with an extremely ceremonious bow, the outlaw departed.

Again the girls heard the great key turn in the rusty lock.

"There is but one hope for us!" Isabel exclaimed. "Ridiculous as it seems, this fellow is in earnest. He means he will carry out his scheme if he can. We must get word to my brother, Manuel, and he will move Heaven and earth to save us!"

CHAPTER /XX.

WOMAN'S WIT.

MARGARET shook her head, for the scheme which the dashing Isabel proposed did not seem to be feasible to her.

"Oh, but there isn't any doubt he will be able to rescue us if we can only manage to let him know the circumstances of our case!" Isabel exclaimed.

"Yes, yes, if we can only get word to him, but there is the difficulty."

"Not at all."

"How can it be done?"

"By bribing the person who is to wait on us."

"But that may be impossible."

"Very true, but I am assuming that it is possible!" the Mexican girl exclaimed in her impulsive way.

"You see, Margaret, you do not know the denizens of this region as well as I do, particularly such men as would be apt to belong to an outlaw band like these Red Riders."

"Such fellows are always ready to betray each other, and the meaner the cut-throat the quicker he is to turn traitor."

"Yes, I presume that is correct."

"Oh, there isn't the least doubt about it!" Isabel exclaimed in the most decided manner.

"We are securely confined here—not the least chance for us to escape—so these Red Riders doubtless calculate, and it is not likely that they will put a very watchful guard over us."

"In all probability one of the meanest of the band will be assigned to the duty, and if so, the chances are great that we can succeed in bribing him to convey intelligence of our present plight to my brother who is at Ysleta."

"Yes, but to bribe the man we need money and I have but little," Margaret objected.

"Well, as far as money goes I haven't much myself, but I have a valuable diamond ring, which, when I travel, I conceal in my bosom, and that will be sure to dazzle the eyes of any ordinary man, and then we can promise him too that when he carries the intelligence to my dear Manuel he will richly reward the service."

Margaret's eyes began to glisten and a hopeful look to appear on her face.

"It is possible that such a thing can be arranged and yet it does not seem very probable."

"Didn't the fellow say that it is the unexpected that always happens?" demanded Isabel.

"Yes, and I only hope that in our case the saying will come true."

Again the grating of the key in the lock came to the ears of the girl.

Some one is coming, and if it is not the Red Rider chief you can depend upon it that I will try my arts upon him!" Isabel exclaimed in the ear of her companion.

It was not the outlaw leader but the man who had acted as guide, and he was accompanied by a swarthy, wrinkled old man dressed like a Mexican, who bore a tray upon which a substantial supper smoked.

"The capt'n don't intend to starve you, you know," the outlaw explained in what was intended to be a jocose manner.

"This here galoot will attend to you, right up to the handle, won't you Jose?"

The half-breed—half Mexican and half Indian—grinned in response.

"He's our cook and head bottle-washer and if that's anything else you want besides what he has brought you byer, jest tell him and he will get it for you, if he kin."

"Of course, you mustn't go for to expect that we run a first class eating-saloon, for we don't, but anything in season, such as you kin find on the ordinary ranch in this country, you kin have."

And then with a clumsy bow the man departed, taking particular care to lock the door after he had got on the other side of it.

While the half-breed was arranging the viands on the table, Isabel seized upon the opportunity to exchange a few words with Margaret.

"Heaven's only favoring us," she said in a rapid, cautious whisper.

"These half-breeds are notoriously treacherous and cunning. I know the race for I have been used to them since I was a child. Their greed, too, is great and there is a far better chance that we will be able to bribe him than if he was a full-blooded Mexican, or in fact a man of any other nation."

"Yes, so I have read," Margaret remarked. "Of course all I know about them is what I have gathered from books."

"I have lived among them all my life and know these half-breeds as well as it is possible for any one. Oh, I don't think there is any doubt that we will be able to win this man to our purpose."

By this time the half-breed had finished arranging the dishes, and with a grin upon his ugly features, said:

"All ready, señoritas," then hastened to place chairs for their accommodation.

"Keep up a stout heart and do not evince the least feeling of uneasiness!" Isabel whispered, rapidly, in the ear of the other as they advanced toward the table.

The ladies seated themselves, and then Isabel, studying the countenance of the half-breed, carefully asked:

"Have I not seen you somewhere before?"

"I think not; I do not remember to have met the señora," the man replied with a shake of the head.

"Your face is very familiar to me and I am almost certain I have met you. You have been in El Paso of course?"

"Oh, yes."

"And at Ysleta?"

"Yes, yes."

"And is not your name, Jose?"

"It is."

"Ah, I felt sure I was not mistaken!" the Mexican girl exclaimed, triumphantly.

She was guessing at the man's name of course, and it was not wonderful that the hit upon his cognomen, considering that Jose is such a common appellation among them that it is calculated that fully one-half of the race bear it.

The man shook his head again and a perplexed look appeared on his face.

"It may be so, but I do not remember."

"My name is Isabel Escobedo."

The man nodded.

"Ah, yes, I know many of that name, Escobedo," he said.

"My brother, Manuel, perhaps," Isabel observed, carelessly, and without in the least betraying how important to her was the question.

"Ah, yes, yes, I know Manuel Escobedo; a fine dashing fellow," and the half-breed grinned, nodding his head knowingly.

"He is at Ysleta now."

"Yes, I saw him there yesterday."

Isabel could not refrain from flashing a triumphant glance from her dark eyes at her companion, but the stolid half-breed did not seem to notice it.

"I should like very much to send word to my brother that we are here," the Mexican girl remarked in a reflective way, casting a look from under her long, dark eyelashes at the half-breed.

He grinned, nodded cunningly and then laid his finger upon his lips.

"Is there any danger of any one overhearing what we say?" Isabel asked, taking the alarm at once.

"Oh, no, the men are in another part of the ranch."

"Well, I am glad of that for I will be able to speak freely," Isabel remarked.

"I presume you understand that we are really prisoners here?"

"Oh, yes—the door locked, no get out if you tried," and the half-breed chuckled as though he thought it was a good joke.

"You are not a member of this outlaw band—you are not one of the Red Riders!"

"Oh, no, no; Jose does not fight. I am the cook."

"Yes, yes, I see. Well, now then, Jose, I do not suppose these outlaws pay you very well?" Isabel remarked with her most winning smile, anxious to gain the confidence of the man.

"Very poorly—not much money," the other replied in a discontented way.

"If I could get any one to carry word to my brother that we are here, and desire to be released, it would be much money in his pocket," Isabel remarked, persuasively.

There came a covetous look into the eyes of the half-breed, but often thinking over the matter for a moment, he shook his head.

"I do not see how it can be done," he said.

"If I should carry word and the Red Riders should find it out they would murder me."

"Yes, but you must arrange the matter so they will not find it out."

"That will not be easy."

"Oh, yes, it will; how on earth is the discovery to be made if we hold our tongues and you keep your own counsel."

"My brother is to be trusted, too, if you make him understand how important is the necessity of keeping quiet."

"See!" And the Mexican girl drew the diamond ring from her bosom and flashed it before the eyes of the half-breed.

"Ah, it is fine—what a sparkler!" he exclaimed.

"I will give you this ring if you will carry the message to my brother that we are here and want him to come to our assistance, and can it not be arranged so that he can get us out of the

ranch by some cunning trick without having to resort to force?"

A cunning look appeared on the face of the half-breed, and he nodded his head in a knowing fashion.

"Yes, yes, I think it can be arranged," he replied.

"To-morrow all the band depart on an expedition, leaving one man to guard the ranch—one of the band and myself."

"He is a hard drinker; all I will have to do is to leave some liquor where he can find it—leave a good supply and within an hour he will be so overcome by it that he will not be able to know what is going on around him."

"An excellent plan!" Isabel exclaimed, "and then my brother can come and take us away without any one being the wiser."

"Yes, yes, no one will know!" and the wrinkled half-breed chuckled, gleefully.

"And you will carry the message and arrange the liquor—you shall have the diamond ring and ten silver ounces."

"Yes, yes, I will do it, but be careful and do not let any of the Red Riders suspect or we will be murdered."

Then the girls turned their attention to the supper, but they were too much excited to eat, and soon they bade the half-breed remove the viands, then they prepared for rest, for on the morrow they hoped to escape.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE RESCUE.

No one came near the apartment of the prisoners until about eight o'clock on the next morning, then there was a knock at the door.

The knocker evidently wished to be sure that the girls had arisen.

They had been up since five, however, for in their state of nervous anxiety they found it impossible to sleep.

It was the outlaw who had been delegated to act as their jailer.

"I hope you find yourself pretty well this morning," the fellow said, with an attempt to appear polite.

"Oh, yes, thank you, we are as well as can be expected under the circumstances," Isabel answered.

"Your breakfast is ready whenever you want it. I am going away to-day on a little expedition, so you won't see no more of me until to-morrow, but, there's another chap who will take my place, and if you want anything in particular, outside of what the old half-breed brings you, jest you tell Jose and he will tell the other feller."

"Thank you, we will remember."

"Have yer grub now?"

"As soon as you please."

"All right; I'll send the old cuss in with it. So-long! Take care of yourselves till I come back!"

And then the man withdrew.

The hearts of the prisoners beat high with hope.

"You see!" Isabel exclaimed, "he confirms the old man's story.

"There is to be an expedition, and all the outlaws will leave the ranch, with the exception of the single man left to guard us."

"Yes, yes, it surely looks as if Heaven was favoring us."

"When the half-breed comes, we will see whether he has succeeded in finding my brother or not."

"He is not the man I take him to be if he did not go through to Ysleta last night. Didn't you notice the covetous expression which appeared on his face when I flashed the diamond before his eyes?"

"Oh, yes, it was evident that he was strongly tempted."

"And then the promise of the silver ounces, too; depend upon it, Margaret, he will not rest satisfied until he has the treasure in his possession!"

"Well, I sincerely hope so."

"Oh, I think the chances are great that he sought my dear Manuel in Ysleta last night, and, perhaps, by this time, all the particulars of the scheme to rescue us are arranged."

"That would be delightful!" Margaret exclaimed.

"All I am afraid of is that it is too good to be true."

"These half-breeds are generally sly and cunning, and such a man as this old Jose is undoubtedly a sly rascal; if he were not, he would not be here, and such a man as he would undoubtedly take advantage of the cover of the darkness to steal away from the ranch and seek Ysleta."

"Oh, yes, that is very probable," Margaret remarked.

"During the night he could manage to leave the ranch, find your brothers and return without the outlaws' suspicions being aroused."

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the appearance of the half-breed, bearing the breakfast of the prisoners.

He grinning in the most friendly manner as he arranged the breakfast on the table, and then placed the chairs.

The hearts of the prisoners fairly jumped for

joy, for they argued from his looks that he was the bearer of good news.

After the breakfast was arranged to the satisfaction of the old man, and the girls were seated at the table, the half-breed stole to the door and listened cautiously for a few moments, as if he was afraid that a watch had been set upon him.

Then he returned to the table; the girls, anxiously watching him, were too excited to eat.

"It is all right," the half-breed said with a chuckle.

"You have seen my brother?" exclaimed Isabel, seemingly almost unable to restrain her impatience.

"I have—last night in Ysleta—it is only a few miles away. I took one of the horses out of the corral and rode there. None of the band noticed my absence, and I was able, thanks to the darkness, to go and come without any one being the wiser."

"How extremely fortunate!" Isabel exclaimed, while Margaret nodded assent.

"Yes, I saw your brother and told him how you were situated; then explained the scheme by which your release could be secured without resorting to open force."

"And can that plan be carried out?" Isabel asked.

"Oh, yes, beyond a doubt," the half-breed replied, in perfect confidence.

"All of the band are gone with the exception of one man, and he is a slave to liquor whenever he can get hold of it."

"Your brother gave me money and I brought two bottles of whisky back with me, which I have placed where the guard will be sure to get hold of them."

"Then, as soon as he becomes insensible, I will let you out; your brother is to be concealed in a grove near here, with horses, ready to receive you."

"But will you not put yourself in peril by aiding us to escape?" asked Margaret, surprising her companion by her forethought.

"Oh, no, I am not here; that is I am not supposed to be here," the half-breed answered, with a prodigious grin.

"My orders are—after your breakfast is ended and I have removed the things—to go to El Paso for provisions."

"After the guard is dead drunk and I have let you out I shall go, and when your escape is discovered the Red Rider will believe that the guard unlocked the door in his drunkenness, without knowing what he was doing, and you took advantage of the opportunity to escape!"

"Oh, that will do splendidly!" Isabel exclaimed, "but I believe I shall die with impatience before the time comes."

"No, no; eat, you will need strength for your journey!"

The counsel was good and the girls endeavored to follow it.

Under the circumstances it was not an easy task though to relish the food, and it was a meager meal they took.

Then, when they had signified that they were through, the half-breed removed the things.

He was obliged to hammer for quite a while on the door before he could get the guard to open it.

"He has found the liquor and is already half-drunk," the half-breed whispered, to the girls, as the guard without plunged at the key, having considerable difficulty in turning it.

After the half-breed crossed the threshold the door was closed and the key again turned, the guard being as much troubled to lock the door as he had been to unlock it, and he swore so loudly at the obstinate lock, as he deemed it, that his words came to the prisoners, despite the thickness of the obstacle which separated them from the ruffian without.

Slowly passed the minutes away now to the impatient, prisoners, pining for freedom.

Eagerly they listened, hoping each instant to hear the grating of the old key in the rusty lock.

It was fully an hour though before they were gratified by hearing the welcome sound.

At last it came, and the girls were all prepared to depart when the half-breed made his appearance.

"It is all right," he said, "the man is so sound in his drunken slumber that even the report of a cannon in his ear would not waken him."

"If you are ready, we will go."

"Oh, we are ready, and have been for a long time!" Isabel exclaimed.

"You need not fear that we will keep you waiting."

"Follow me!" said the half-breed.

Gladly the girls left the place of their confinement.

The half-breed led the way through the ranch into the open courtyard, and then through the great doors to the open country.

And as soon as the party were through the portal, and the half-breed had swung the massive doors together again, a young and dashing-looking Mexican, robed in the picturesque costume common to the natives of the land of Mexico, made his appearance from a clump of timber, a few hundred yards from the ranch.

He was on horseback and led two riderless steeds equipped with side-saddles.

This was Manuel Escobedo, a handsome young fellow about thirty years old, although his complexion was swarthy, as became the child of a land where the sun's rays are felt in their full strength, but his features were regular, with the same brilliant black eyes that Isabel possessed.

A close observer would have detected indications in the young man's face that he had led a pretty fast life, and would have immediately come to the conclusion he was a man who would bear watching; but Margaret, of course was not possessed of any such judgment, and her first impression of Manuel Escobedo, as he rode forth from the grove in the guise of a guardian angel, was that he was a perfect specimen of manly beauty.

He dashed up to the ladies in gallant style, reined in his horse sharply, leaped to the ground, and catching his sister in his arms, kissed her with the utmost tenderness.

"Thank heaven I have come in time to save you!" he cried.

"This is our cousin, Margaret," Isabel said.

Gallantly Manuel Escobedo doffed his sombrero, and exclaimed:

"Gladly do I welcome you to the land of your birth, and though we have never met before, I trust we will be warm friends in the future!"

To this, Margaret, blushing under the earnest gaze of admiration that the young man bent upon her, made suitable reply.

"But, come! we must be off, for this is no place to waste our time!" Manuel Escobedo cried.

"Here, Jose, are your ounces, and see that you keep a still tongue in your head for all our sakes, for these Red Riders have long arms and strike hard at their foes!"

The half-breed grinned, the young man assisted the ladies to mount, then sprung into the saddle himself and away they went.

CHAPTER XXII.

ISABEL'S ADVICE.

"WHERE will we go—to Ysleta?" asked Isabel, after they were well away from the neighborhood of the lonely ranch.

"No, to El Paso," the young man replied. "I was in the town yesterday and heard that Judge Bullifant was expected there to-morrow, coming on purpose to meet Miss Margaret."

"Yes, the judge wrote me that he would meet me in El Paso upon my arrival," the heiress remarked, "and to wait a few days in Albuquerque, dispatching a letter the moment I arrived in the town, so as to give time for him to come to El Paso, for he had so much business, to which he must attend, taking him away from home, that unless he was warned in advance of the time of my arrival he could not be sure of meeting me."

"Yes, that is true, the judge is a very busy man," Manuel Escobedo observed.

"Were you not thunderstruck, Manuel, when the half-breed brought the news that we were in the power of these terrible outlaws, the Red Riders?" Isabel asked.

"Yes, I most certainly was, and at first I could hardly believe the news was true, but I knew Jose of old, and though he is about as big a scamp as any half-breed in the land, yet when it is for his interest to tell the truth he can be relied upon."

"These Red Riders were flying at high game though when they abducted such a person as the heiress of Escobedo to hold for a ransom."

"Oh, bless you! that wasn't their game!" Isabel exclaimed.

"No, what then?"

The Mexican girl explained at length the strange plan of the outlaw chief, and Manuel Escobedo listened in utter amazement.

"Well, upon my word this passes all belief!" he exclaimed.

"Why, the fellow is even more audacious than I believed him to be. It was a lucky chance that I was able to rescue you from such a trap."

"I hope, Manuel, that you will not bring down the vengeance of the gang upon your head by interfering in our behalf?" Isabel remarked, anxiously.

"Oh, I don't doubt that they will be after me fast enough, if they discover that I had a hand in the matter," the young man replied.

"This outlaw gang is a terrible one, Cousin Margaret," he continued, turning to the heiress. "It is one of the largest and most desperate bands that has ever existed along the Rio Grande, and from the fact of their always wearing a disguise no one has any knowledge of who the outlaws really are; the suspicion is that many of them are men who occupy good positions and would never be suspected of belonging to any such gang, and that fact renders their power more terrible, for when a man converses with another in regard to the band he cannot be sure that he is not speaking with one of the outlaws."

"It is really dreadful," Isabel observed, while Margaret listened in wonder, for the account seemed to her more like an ancient tale of the past than a story of the present.

"Yes, like the most of men who are well-acquainted with the power of these desperate Red Riders, I am not anxious to incur their displeasure and have to keep a constant watch for fear they may strike a blow at me; under the circumstances, though, I had to interfere."

"Oh, I am so sorry that for my sake you exposed yourself to this danger!" Margaret exclaimed.

"Gladly would I do it again under like circumstances," replied the young man, gallantly.

"I have an idea!" exclaimed Isabel. "Listen! No one but ourselves and the half-breed knows that you had aught to do with the matter."

"Old Jose will be certain not to speak of it, for to do so would only endanger his own life, so if we keep the matter quiet, no one will ever know that to you we owe our escape from the power of the outlaws."

"There isn't any need, you know, Margaret, of your saying anything to Judge Bullifant about the affair, as long as you arrive in El Paso safe and sound."

"There is no harm in concealing it, and much mischief might come if the episode becomes public."

Margaret Escobedo was the very soul of honor, and above all things detested falsehood or evasion. In the present case, she would have preferred not to make a mystery out of the matter; yet, under the circumstances, she did not see how she could help keeping silent, and so she remarked that she would not mention the matter.

"You will find Judge Bullifant a rather odd man," Manuel Escobedo observed. "But the judge's heart is in the right place, and after you come to know him you will appreciate his worth."

"Humph! I doubt if the judge would speak as favorably of you!" Isabel exclaimed.

"The judge and I have never got along very well together," the young man explained, "and I know that he hasn't a particularly good opinion of me; but that is no reason why I should not do the judge full justice."

"You see, Cousin Margaret, I have been quite a wild fellow in my time. I don't attempt to excuse myself; young men will be wild and up to all sorts of foolish pranks. I have sobered down now, but the judge doesn't give me credit for it."

"He thinks I am still the wild, reckless fellow as in the days of yore."

"Some time he will learn that you have sown all your wild oats, and then he may be inclined to do you justice," Isabel remarked.

"Very true; and until that time comes, I must possess my soul with patience."

"Where were you to go after reaching El Paso?" asked the young man, addressing Margaret.

"To the Hotel Mexico," she replied.

"Ah, yes, I remember now; that is the judge's headquarters when he is in El Paso," Manuel observed.

"You will undoubtedly find all arrangements made for you. But, let me see; your advent into El Paso on horseback, when you are expected to arrive by the stage coach, will be sure to give rise to talk, and so the secret of your rescue may leak out," the young Mexican added reflectively.

"I have an idea," exclaimed Isabel. "Suppose we go to the first station on the stage-route from El Paso, and take the stage which passes there to-day? Then we will arrive by the stage, just as we were expected, and no one will be apt to suspect that we have not come all the way by this particular coach."

"An excellent idea indeed!" Manuel Escobedo exclaimed. "And after you are safely domiciled in El Paso at the Hotel Mexico I will call upon you, Isabel can introduce me and no one will have the least suspicion that we have ever met before."

Isabel laughed, merrily.

"Yes, yes!" she exclaimed, "it will be quite a joke. That will be a little secret which we will have all to ourselves."

And so the plan was settled upon.

Margaret in her heart did not like the idea at all, for she felt a repugnance to deception of any kind, but, under the circumstances, she saw no way to avoid playing the part thus forced upon her.

The party rode directly to the stage station, which was some ten miles up the river above El Paso, and as it was situated in a broken and well-wooded country it was possible for the party to approach quite near to the station without danger of being observed by the people in charge of it.

Manuel Escobedo knew about what time the stage was due, and the party made themselves as comfortable as possible in the neighborhood until it was nearly time for the coach to arrive.

Then, bidding farewell to the young man, the two young girls proceeded to the station.

There was no one there but a dull-headed Mexican, and he sold the ladies tickets to El Paso, without ever troubling himself with

speculation as to how they happened to be in the neighborhood.

So the companions arrived in El Paso and alighted from the coach at the Hotel Mexico, which was the end of the stage route just as had been arranged. The landlord was on the alert to receive them.

None host of the Hotel Mexico was not a Mexican, as would be imagined, but a jolly fat German, Fritz Hoffenstein by name.

He spoke pretty good English, having only a slight accent, and greeted the two ladies as if they had been the dearest friends he had in the world.

Being slightly acquainted with Isabel Escobedo it was natural for the landlord to come to the conclusion, when he saw her in company with the other lady, that the stranger was the heiress expected by the lawyer.

A room was all ready for Miss Margaret, but, as the host explained, Judge Bullifant had not expected Miss Isabel and so no preparations had been made for her.

Not that it made any particular difference, the host added, for he had rooms enough and could make the young lady comfortable, although he was not prepared for her coming.

Judge Bullifant arrived that night and after getting his supper sent word that he would be pleased to have an interview with his ward.

"I will retire," said Isabel, who was with Margaret when the message came, "for when it comes to business, you know, two is company and a third is decidedly in the way."

"Oh, I don't suppose the judge has anything in particular to say to me," Margaret remarked.

"Well, I would rather not be present when he comes, for the judge is an odd sort of a man, and he would not be apt to like it."

Margaret offered no further objection, and the Mexican girl departed.

During this brief acquaintance the dashing Isabel had managed to make an extremely favorable impression upon her Eastern cousin, and Margaret had come to rely a great deal upon her judgment.

The conflicting accounts which had come to her ears regarding Judge Bullifant excited her curiosity, and she was anxious to see for herself just what kind of a man the old lawyer was.

A few moments after Isabel's departure there was a knock at the door, and Margaret admitted a gentleman who announced that he was Judge Bullifant.

CHAPTER XXIII.

JUDGE BULLIFANT.

The judge was an undersized, rather fat man, with sharp features, and a short, bristly gray beard.

He had an extremely peculiar, abrupt way with him.

The moment Margaret opened the door, he exclaimed:

"Aha, this is Miss Margaret Escobedo, I suppose? I am your guardian, Judge Bullifant. How-y-dot?"

And then he marched into the room and glared around him as though he expected to find some one there.

Margaret did not know exactly what to make of his strange way, but recovering as soon as she could from the slight confusion into which she had been thrown by his strangeness, hastened to bring him a chair.

"Thank ye—thank ye!" cried the judge, accepting the chair, but still glancing around the apartment as if in search of some one.

Then, seemingly satisfied that there wasn't any one in the room but himself and his companion, he lowered his tone to a mysterious whisper, and said:

"Where is she?"

Margaret was so bothered by the unexpected question, as well as by the queer way in which the judge put it that she did not know what to say.

The old gentleman guessed at once from the look of perplexity upon her face that she did not understand what he meant, and so proceeded to explain:

"I refer to that extremely lively young lady who is called Miss Isabel Escobedo," he said.

"She is in her apartment, sir."

"Ah! did not want to see me!" exclaimed the lawyer, elevating his eyebrows in an extremely peculiar way.

"Aha! extremely thoughtful of her—extremely! By the by, how did it happen that you came in company with Miss Isabel?"

"I met her accidentally in the hotel in Albuquerque. In obedience to your instructions, I halted there and wrote to you, and, being in the parlor of the hotel, I inquired of a young lady who was there, in regard to how the stages run to El Paso, and while we were talking the discovery came about that we were cousins."

"Ah, yes, yes, I see," and the contracted brow of the old lawyer relaxed a little.

"The meeting was purely accidental then?"

"Yes, sir. Miss Escobedo had been on a visit to some friends at Taos, and was on her way

home. When she learned that I had to wait in Albuquerque, she said she would wait, too, for it would be so much more pleasant for us to travel in company."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that."

"Well, what impression did Miss Isabel make on you?"

"Very good, indeed; we have become the best of friends."

"Ah!" and the old lawyer drew a deep breath; then he was silent for a moment, as if collecting his thoughts.

Finally he said in a manner which he evidently designed to be extremely friendly:

"My dear Miss Margaret, I am the oldest, and, as he was wont to say, the best friend your father had in the world."

"Although we were in most respects as different as two men could well be, yet we were chums for years, and got on splendidly together. I was not only his legal adviser but also his partner in a number of enterprises, and, as far as I can remember, during our friendship, which extended over so many years, there was only one matter upon which we differed radically, and that was in regard to your mother."

"Your father was in the wrong in that matter, and I never hesitated to tell him so, but he was obstinate, and, for once, refused to be guided by my advice; but when he felt that death was nigh, he admitted his error, and was anxious to do all in his power to atone for his harshness."

"I make this explanation so you will understand that though I am a new acquaintance yet I am an old friend."

"Oh, sir, I feel so thankful to you—I am so grateful to any one who was a friend of my mother!" Margaret exclaimed, with clasped hands, while the big tears welled up into her beautiful eyes.

"My dear Margaret—for I will drop the formal Miss, and speak to you just as freely and frankly as though you were my own child—you occupy a very peculiar position, and I want you to understand all about it, so you will know how to conduct yourself."

"I shall be very glad, indeed, to learn all that I ought to know."

"In the first place, then, you are the heiress of one of the richest estates in this part of the country."

"In fact, to get at it in round figures, you are worth about a million of dollars."

An exclamation of amazement came from the lips of the girl at this announcement.

"I knew that my father was counted to be rich, but I hadn't any idea he was worth any such sum as that."

"It is the truth; I attended to all his business matters—everything was fixed up in good shape when he died—and I know just about what he was worth."

"Now, to explain what I meant when I said you occupied a peculiar position."

"Your father comes of an old Spanish-Mexican family with branches all through both Mexico and Texas, and I supposed had about as many relatives as any man along the Rio Grande."

"None of them could claim near kinship though, and when your father died, leaving this princely estate, each and every one of these distant relatives immediately jumped to the conclusion that he or she—as the case might be—would come in for a share of the wealth."

"The fact that your mother and yourself were in the East led the most of the relatives to the belief that you were both dead."

"Their disappointment when it was found that you were alive and had inherited all the estate can readily be imagined."

"Yes, it must have been a great blow to them."

"Undoubtedly, and some of the parties, I know, had high hopes, this Miss Isabel, for one. She was quite a favorite with your father, having been brought up on his ranch—both she and her brother—and, undoubtedly, they expected to be remembered in his will."

"I will qualify that statement though," the old lawyer remarked after a pause.

"I don't really think the young man, Manuel, thought there was much chance for him, for he had managed to get into some ugly scrapes, and as he knew the old cattle-king was aware of his conduct, he, probably, had sense enough to know he would be left out in the cold."

"Didn't Isabel ever mention to you that a good many people were disappointed because the property was left to you?"

"Oh, yes, but she gave no hint that she was among the number."

"I suppose the young lady hasn't a very good opinion of me?" the old lawyer remarked carelessly, but with his shrewd eyes fixed intently upon the girl's face, just as if he had a suspicion that Margaret might not feel inclined to betray any confidence reposed in her."

But the girl answered without hesitation.

"Oh, no, she did not speak as if she did not like you. All she said was that she thought you judged her brother too harshly—that you had a prejudice against him on account of some youthful errors he had committed."

"Well, that was certainly drawing it mild

enough," the judge remarked with a dry chuckle.

"I will confess to you, Margaret, that I never liked that girl; to my thinking she was deep as the ocean and as sly as the imps below are supposed to be."

"Oh, I think you wrong her, sir!" Margaret exclaimed, decidedly shocked by the abrupt announcement.

"Well, maybe I do," the old lawyer replied. "I will admit that I am not as good a judge of women as I might be. I am an old bachelor, an only child, never had any sisters, and so never had a chance to get intimately acquainted with many of the fair sex."

"I got the idea years ago that Isabel was both sly and deep, although I will give the girl credit for saying that she always behaved herself when I was around."

"I admit, you see, that my suspicion is mere surmise; nothing in the world for me to go upon. One point in the girl's favor is that she is devotedly attached to her brother, and at one time he was about as wild a young fellow as could be scared up anywhere along the Rio Grande."

"But he has altered now, has he not?" Margaret inquired, her good nature prompting her to speak a favorable word for the young man who had made more of an impression upon her, than she would have been willing to admit.

"So Isabel declares," she continued, perceiving that the judge hesitated.

"She says that though he was quite wild at one time he had reformed now."

"Aba, she has been singing his praises, has she?" exclaimed the lawyer. "She will be trying to make a match between you one of these days, maybe," and the judge chuckled.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed the girl, blushing at the idea.

"Well, now, I will tell you the honest truth, Margaret, when I heard that you and Isabel had come to El Paso together my suspicions were at once excited.

"I thought she had made your acquaintance on the road on purpose to entrap you in some way, for I will admit I had a terrible bad opinion of her."

"I really think, sir, that you wrong her, for she seems to be a sweet, affectionate girl."

"Well, I am glad my surmise is not correct. Even to a hardened old wretch of a lawyer, such as I am, it is always pleasant to discover that some of our fellow-beings are better than they were thought to be."

"Where is Isabel going, by the way?"

"To a ranch which her brother now occupies on the river a few miles below my father's place."

"Oh, yes, now I think of it, I remember to have heard that Manuel had a ranch there and was doing well."

"Well, as Isabel has made so good an impression upon you, ask her to pay you a visit and stop until she is tired, you know. I am quite willing."

"Oh, thank you, sir, it is the very favor I would have asked!" Margaret exclaimed.

"We'll get away to-morrow," the judge remarked, rising. "You can tender the invitation to Isabel as coming from me. I will see you in the morning; good-night," and the judge departed.

In the entry he remarked to himself.

"I can watch this tiger-cat better at the ranch than elsewhere and, perhaps, can detect her game."

CHAPTER XXIV.

BLAKE ON THE TRAIL.

AFTER breakfast on the ensuing day the judge with the two young ladies departed for the Escobedo Ranch down the Rio Grande.

And now having seen our heroine on her way to her own home we will return to our hero whom we have neglected too long.

The Fresh of 'Frisco, and his companion, Old California Joe, were up betimes in the morning, notwithstanding the late hour at which they had gone to bed after their battle with the sports of the town.

Jackson Blake's first move, after he and his companion had partaken of a hearty breakfast, was to deposit the bulk of the wealth which he had acquired so easily with one of the bankers of the town, then the pair called upon the old Jew pawnbroker and astonished that worthy by redeeming the valuables upon which the loan had been effected.

The Jew was amazed.

"Mine gootness! you must have been doing some Red Rider road-agent business last night, mine fr'en!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, no, only went for some of your sharks and tigers here and showed them a trick or two that they didn't understand," the Fresh replied.

"You bet high on that!" California Joe exclaimed. And if we didn't make some of the wolves of this town feel sick last night you kin take my head for a football!"

A sudden light flashed upon the Jew's mind.

"Oh, mine gootness!" he cried, "was it you, my tears, who got away with Mexican Mike last night, then laid Red Sancho out as flat as a pan-

cake, and wound up by skinning Doc Moses's little faro game!"

"Well, I guess we were there or thereabouts, the Fresh replied."

"You old fraud of a Jew, you kin jest bet yer boots we were thar!" California Joe exclaimed.

"You did the skinning last night, pard," he continued turning to the Fresh, "so, to kinder make an even thing of it, I will do the blowing to-day."

"That is all right; I am not much of a man to toot my own horn, so you can do the blowing and welcome."

"Now, aged son of Israel, touching these revolvers of mine—" he continued.

"They are here! mine gootness! how lucky it was!" the old Jew exclaimed, rubbing his hands and grinning until his mouth extended almost from ear to ear.

"Oho! they are here then?" the Fresh cried.

"Yesh, yesh, and I am glad you are going to get them back for they are a beautiful set of barkers! Oh, they are regular bulldogs."

"You are right about that. Let me see, fifty was the ante, I think?"

"Yesh, fifty, unless, mine fr'en', you think you ought to pay me something for my trouble," remarked the old Jew in a wheedling way.

The Fresh burst into a loud laugh and old California Joe fairly haw-hawed, mule fashion.

"Well, upon my word if this isn't the richest joke of the season!" Jackson Blake declared.

"Wa-al now, a man would be safe in betting the soles right offen his butes on that!" old California Joe declared.

"You act as agent for a gang of outlaws, collect fifty dollars for a pair of revolvers, stolen property, and then coolly suggest that the victim might give you something for your trouble; just as if you wasn't going to collar about twenty-five dollars out of this fifty, anyhow!"

"Twenty-five!" exclaimed the old plainsman. "Durn my ole gizzard! if the Red Riders git mor'n ten dollars outen the fifty they will be a durned sight more lucky than I reckon they'll be!"

"Oh, mine gootness!" cried the Jew pawnbroker with uplifted hands, "why, mine fr'en's, you must think I am a regular robber!"

"A robber!" the Fresh cried, "well, all I have to say is that if you can't give any road-agent in the country points then you are not the man I take you to be!"

"He kin skin a cat and git more hide offen her than any other galoot from here to no-where!" the mountain man declared.

In order to put a stop to the string of "compliments" the pawnbroker made haste to produce the revolvers.

The eyes of the Fresh of 'Frisco sparkled as they beheld the weapons which had served him so well in many a deadly fight.

"Aha! it does my heart good to behold those jolly boys again!" Blake exclaimed.

"Many a gay old skirmish have I been into with these beauties and they never went back on the man that owned them, nary time!"

"Oh, yesh, they are beautiful tools!" the old Jew exclaimed.

"So help me Moses! I never saw a finer pair!"

"And you got them so quickly too; the Red Riders must be right in this neigborhood, eh, Hadad, old man?"

The Jew winced as the words reached his ears, the Fresh of 'Frisco looking him straight in the eyes.

Despite his wonderful powers of self-control he was so disturbed by the suggestion that he could not help betraying it.

"Mine gootness! I know nothing about it!" he protested.

"But you got the revolvers all the same though!" exclaimed the Fresh.

"Oh, he gits thar, every time, and don't you forget it!" cried old California Joe.

"One of my peddlers, my tear," said the Jew, rubbing his hands softly together, and smiling blandly in the faces of his visitors.

"Ab, yes, I see," and the Fresh leaning his hands upon the counter, behind which stood the Jew, laughed in the merriest kind of a way in the face of the other, "one of your peddlers brought them in."

"Yesh, yesh."

"So of course you don't know anything about it?"

"No, no, my tear."

"All you know about the matter is to deliver the pistols and take the fifty dollars."

"Yesh, yesh."

"Where can I find this peddler—what's his name?" asked the Fresh, abruptly, to the decided consternation of the old man.

"Eh, w'at is dot?" cried the Jew, "breaking the English" dreadfully in his excitement.

"You just tell me his name and I will hunt him up in the town, and then when I find him, he will have to spit out all he knows of the Red Riders or I will tan his hide to make me a pair of moccasins!"

The old Jew listened in terrified amazement and then up went his hands in horror.

Before he could speak though old California Joe exclaimed:

"That is the kind of talk that warms me right

up! That is the proper kind of say-so. Oh, thar'll be the biggest kind of a fandango when you 'light onto the critter!

"Talk 'bout yer bull-fights, wah!"

"Mine gootness! mine fr'en', you must not think of doing such a thing. The peddler is an honest man—"

"Of course! Who said he wasn't? And, being an honest man, when I tell him I am on the trail of the Red Riders he will tell me all he knows about them."

"And if he don't, you'll make him chew soap!" California Joe observed in the gravest possible way.

"Oh, Moses! w'at ish dot?" cried the pawn-broker.

"You just tell me who he is and if he is in El Paso you can bet all the ducats you've got in the world that I will get the truth out of him!" the Fresh of 'Frisco observed in the most confident way.

The words suggested a means of escape to old Solomons, and eagerly he seized upon it.

"Ah, ye h, but he is not in El Paso now!" he exclaimed.

"He went away last night. He merely came to town to leave the revolvers and then went right away."

"Where to?"

"To Chihuahua," responded the Jew, without the least hesitation.

"When is he to come after the money?"

"In a week he said he would be back."

"Well, I'll be on hand; but I don't suppose you know the exact day?"

"Oh, no," responded the pawnbroker, shrugging his shoulders. "It may be eight or ten days. He is a bird of passage; no one knows when he comes and goes."

"What's his handle?"

"Abraham Krone," answered the Jew, without a moment's hesitation.

"Hadad, you old sinner, you are lying, and you know you are!" the Fresh declared, for his suspicions were at once excited by the glib manner in which the other rattled off the name.

"That is the name he calls himself when he does business with me. He may have a dozen for all I know," replied Solomons, affecting to misunderstand the other's meaning.

"Maybe I will run across him one of these days. I reckon, though, I will find him much nearer El Paso than Chihuahua."

"Maybe—maybe—who can tell. The prophet says that all men are liars," the Jew replied, with the utmost composure.

"I reckon he must hev been hevin' a deal with some of the pawnbrokers when he spit that out," exclaimed the old mountain-man.

"I am glad you put me on the trail, my gentle Jew!" the Fresh observed. "For now I have a clew that the Red Riders are near at hand, I will try my luck and see if I can't get on their track right here in El Pas."

"Ah, mine fr'en', if you try to meddle with the Red Riders, you will be apt to suffer," the old Jew remarked, with a warning shake of the head.

"Yes, either they or I will suffer before the picnic is ended, I reckon."

"If you will take my advice, you will not bother your head with them, my fr'en'."

"Oh, but I will; they have skinned me out of some ducats, and I am going in to get square."

"Yes, you bet yer butes, and that's the kind of night owls we are!" California Joe declared.

"They wouldn't have had such an easy deal when they stopped the stage if it hadn't been for a Mexican girl, who sat by my side, and threw her arms around me so that I couldn't draw my weapons just as the gang appeared," the Fresh remarked.

"Ah, she was terribly frightened, no doubt, poor girl," the old Jew observed with a shake of the head.

"I can understand it; her heart was up in her mouth."

"Oh, yes, she was a dear little angel with arms of steel, and she hampered me so I couldn't draw my weapons, but I understood her game; I'm nobody's fool."

"She was in league with the road-agents—one of the Red Rider gang."

"Mine gootness!" cried the Jew, surprised by the unexpected accusation, "dot lady to one of the best families belongs, Senora Isabel Escobedo!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A BOLD PROPOSAL.

"Ono!" cried the Fresh, in triumph, when he perceived that the old Jew, with all his craftiness, had fallen into the trap he had so cunningly laid for him, "you know the party, then?"

"Oh, yesh, there is no better family than the Escobedos along the Rio Grande, and the idea dot a lady like Miss Isabel should be in league with a gang of road-agents is ridiculous!" the old Jew declared.

"You think it is, eh?" asked the Fresh, with a quizzical look.

"My dear mans, I know it is. I tell you vat it is, my goot fr'en', if you go to make such fool-

ish talk as dot, you must not walk near the lunatic asylum to, or else the keepers will have you inside before you know what is der matter."

"You mean that for kind of a joke, eh?" the Fresh remarked, in an innocent way.

"He's mean enuff for anything!" California Joe seized upon this opportunity for declaring.

"And, I say, do you know the other young lady who was in the coach, Miss Margaret Escobedo?" Blake asked.

"I do not, she must be a stranger."

"And you don't believe my yarn that when the Red Riders attacked the coach this Miss Isabel Escobedo flung her arms around me in such a way that I was not able to get out my weapons, for, you see, Hadad, my jewel, I am one of the reckless kind of fellows who object to being walked over, and most certainly I would have given the Red Riders a fight if I had had the ghost of a chance for my white alley?"

"Oh, yesh, the lady in her fright at the attack, might have clung to you so that you could not use your weapons, but that she did it on purpose—mine gootness, mine fr'en', dot is de biggest joke of der season!" and the old man burst into a fit of laughter, but his merriment was so forced and unnatural that it would not have deceived even less experienced men than the two adventurers.

"Oh, let up on that, Hadad, old man, that is the worst attempt at a laugh I have run across since I struck the Rio Grande!" Blake exclaimed.

The Jew's laugh vanished.

"Aha, I see, you do not the joke like?" he remarked.

"No, not such a weak one as that," the Fresh retorted.

"Well, you may talk as you please; I know it wasn't by any accident that the girl grabbed me and held on for dear life, although I yelled to her to let go, so I could give the Red Riders a taste of my quality."

The Jew shook his head incredulously.

"I suppose you think I am crazy for sure, when I tell you that there was some gum game going on in connection with the stage the Red Riders attacked, and that the stage-agent at Las Cruces did his best to keep me from taking the coach and I had to whip the man out of his boots before I could get him to sell me a ticket."

The pawnbroker surveyed the adventurer in amazement, and upon his face was a look which seemed to say:

"What manner of man is this who seems not to know the meaning of the word, fear?"

"I felt sure there was some deviltry afoot when he wasn't willing I should go in the stage; so I just made up my mind that I would ride in the barse for spite, and I whaled the agent until he was glad to cry quits; and now that I am kinder gitting on the track of the thing, I'm beginning to think there was a plot all along the line."

"I reckon the driver of the coach was in it, too, from the way in which he reined up when the Red Riders came down upon the stage."

A decidedly uneasy expression appeared on the face of the old Jew, which he endeavored to cover with a laugh.

"Upon my word, mine fr'en', you make me smile!" the pawnbroker declared.

"You are the most suspicious mans as never was!"

"If you keep on, you will be suspecting next that everybody you meet in El Paso is mixed up with der Red Riders."

But though the Jew forced a grin as he concluded his remarks, it did not hide the uneasiness which had evidently taken possession of him.

"Well, I reckon that the headquarters of the Red Riders is right here in El Paso," the Fresh replied in a confident way, which caused the old man to stare.

"In fact, I think if I chose to stretch my arm out, I could put my hand on the shoulder of one of the gang now."

And as he spoke, Jackson Blake extended his hand toward the pawnbroker, who shrunk back in evident alarm.

"Now, don't joke in dot way, mine goot fr'en'; I don't like it! I can no fun mineself see in such foolishness!" he expostulated.

"Oh, I'm not fooling; I mean every word I say," Blake replied.

"You may not be an actual member of the Red Rider band, but you are a confederate, and that is just about as bad. You would do anything you could to help them, and you know it."

"You are the 'fence'—the man who gets rid of the stolen property—and I've no doubt you make a mighty good thing of it. That is how you happened to get hold of my revolvers."

"So help me, Moses, it is not so!" the old Jew declared, energetically.

"I am but the agent—the agent of the peddler—and with whom he deals I know not. It is none of my business; questions I do not ask. I charge a fair per cent. for mine trouble, that is all."

And now, having led the Jew off a little, the

Fresh sprung the trap which he had been setting for him.

"Say, how does it happen that you know about this Isabel Escobedo being in the coach which was stopped by the Red Riders?"

The Jew was dazed for a moment; the unexpected attack confused him.

"Why, mine gootness, does not everybody know? Did she not come to El Paso by the coach?" he stammered, in great confusion.

"Not by a jugful!" the Fresh declared, emphatically.

"Neither one of the two girls came by the coach, for both of them got out of the stage a little while before it got to El Paso. Anyway, that is what the driver says, and I reckon in this case he knows what he is talking about, although he isn't a man who wouldn't lie if he could make anything by it."

"But one thing is certain, neither of the girls is in El Paso, as far as anybody knows, and for Miss Margaret all preparations have been made at the Hotel Mexico, and if she was in the town she would surely go there, according to the arrangements made by old Judge Bullifant."

Again the Jew stared as the name came to his ears.

"Upon mine word, mine frien', you seem to be well-posted," the Hebrew remarked.

"Oh, yes, I have been hustling around pretty lively since I struck El Paso," the Fresh replied.

"When you come to get well-acquainted with a gentleman about my size you will find that there is a good deal of git up and git thar in yours truly."

"But, mine frien', why bother you your head about this matter which cannot concern you in the least?" the old Jew asked in his coaxing, wheedling way.

"Because I can't help it—that is my disposition, you know. I've got to interfere in every scrape that is going on around me. It don't matter a bit whether it concerns me or not. I'm too fresh, you know; that is where my name comes from."

"Now, in this affair I think I have got hold of the tail of a good-sized rat and I am going to do my level best to smoke the animal out of his hole!"

"The girl, Margaret Escobedo is one of the biggest heiresses along the Rio Grande, I am told!"

"Yesh, yesh, she is."

"And these Red Riders are up to some deviltry in regard to her, but I am going to have a finger in the pie!"

"I'm going to find out where that girl has gone, for the driver told the truth about her not coming to El Paso in the stage. One other passenger was in the stage—a fellow who said he was a stockman and claimed the name of Jackson, which by the way is my cognomen."

"Ah, yesh, I remember!" cried the Jew, a smile lighting up his countenance, as a bright idea came to him.

"I met this Mister Jackson; it was dot mans who told me about der people in der coach."

"Oh, yes, of course you met him!" exclaimed the Fresh in an extremely sarcastic way.

"My dear mans, I did!" persisted the Jew. "I would not lie to you for the world!"

"Of course, I'm not doubting your word in the least. He came straight to you the moment he struck the town."

The Jew was astounded.

"Mine gootness! Why do you think like dot?"

"Because he was a confederate of the Red Riders and he came to you to report, for I reckon that through you the wires are pulle1."

The under jaw of the Jew dropped, and for a moment he knew not what to say, but, at last, recovering himself with a mighty effort, he grinned a ghastly smile and said:

"Aha, mine fr'en', you are der greatest joker dot never was! I am an honest man and I know not what you means."

"Well, I have entered for this fight and you can bet your life that I am going to be in at the death, so just tell your Red Rider pards that if they don't wipe me out I will be mighty certain to come that game on them."

"Ah, yesh, but I cannot tell der mans dot I do not know."

"Oh, you'll find a way, I reckon," was the Fresh's careless response.

"But now to business; you want fifty on these tools."

"Dot was der price, I believe."

"I'll tell you what I'll do; I'll put a hundred up instead of fifty, and we'll throw dice to see who takes the pile—the revolvers and the money both."

"Oh, mine fr'en', dot would be gambling, and I never gambles. I am an honest man!" the pawnbroker replied.

"I'll put up two hundred ducats against the revolvers; will that be a temptation?"

The eyes of the Jew glistened—the temptation was strong, but he resisted manfully and shook his head.

"No, no, I do not want to win your money, mine fr'en'. Pay over der fifty dollars and take your revolvers."

"Oh, come, brace up and have some style about you!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"If you have sand enough to chip into this game, you might make enough to buy a small farm."

"Come! I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you the first chuck of the dice," and from his pocket the adventurer produced a small leather dice-box and three ivory cubes.

"We'll settle the thing on a single cast, the highest to win."

"You can have first throw, as I said, and if you are not satisfied with what you throw, you need not go on, or you can go on and throw until you are satisfied, and then I'll engage to beat it; but, of course, it must be one that can be beaten. I can't let you throw until you make three sixes, you know, for then I wouldn't have any show at all."

"Wa-al, darn my ole gizzard if I ever heered sich a fool offer as that in all my born days!" California Joe exclaimed, unable to restrain his amazement and keep silent.

"Why, see hyer, pard, you don't stand no show at all! You're jest giving this old fraud a chance to skin ye from the word go!"

"Oh, give the old man a chance!" the Fresh replied.

The temptation was too strong for the Jew to resist; apparently all the chances were in his favor, and he really gloated over the opportunity to win the stranger's cash.

"I will go you!" he cried. "I am an honest man and never gambles, and, maybe, if I win your money you will see the error of your ways and gamble no more."

"Oh, yes, that is just the kind of man I am—in a horn!"

"No, sir-ee, hoss fly, bumble-bee! I'm a sport from Sportville, and I've got more sand in my craw than any June-bug you ever ran across."

"Here are the little jokers!" and the Fresh passed the dice and box over to the Jew, who examined them carefully.

"Now go ahead and let us see what you can do for your country!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

SQUEEZING THE JEW.

THERE'S an old saying that a man may resist temptation for thirty years and then fall a victim.

It was so in this case.

The old Jew had spoken the truth when he said that he never gambled.

In all his life he had never risked a cent upon the uncertain chances of fate as illustrated by the painted pasteboards, the ivory cubes with the black spots, or any other of the ingenious devices invented by man for the purpose of acquiring money without having the trouble of working for it.

But the Fresh had such a persuasive way with him.

There was about the man that personal magnetism which some highly-favored souls possess in such a great degree.

Some of the bunko men—the fellows who manage to lead really eminent men into their games—claim that if they were not possessed of this attraction they would never be able to succeed in the wonderful way that they do sometimes.

Be that as it may, the Californian had succeeded in persuading the old pawnbroker to do something which he had never done before in his life.

With the natural suspicion of his race the old man had narrowly examined the dice and the dice-box.

He was not going to have any tricks played upon him.

As far as he could see however there wasn't anything wrong about either article.

The Jew, being up to tricks of all kinds, had heard of "loaded" dice, that is, ivory cubes plugged and filled with lead in such a way that no matter how they were thrown, or who threw them, a certain number always came.

But these dice seemed to be all right; besides, as he had first throw, if there was anything wrong about the dice it could not operate against him for he need not go on with the affair if he was not satisfied with his throw.

Old Solomons put the dice into the box and rattled them gayly.

"So help me Moses!" he exclaimed, "I never thought that anybody would ever get me to do anything of this kind!"

"A man never knows what is going to happen in this world," the Fresh replied, "and now we have got you started, you will be going over and clearing out Doc Moses's faro bank the first thing you know."

"Say, suppose to make the matter more interesting that we put up a hundred dollars a side more."

"Are you game for it?"

But the Jew was not game enough to accept any such proposal and said so in the firmest manner.

"What you need is more sand!" the adventurer declared.

"Not a whole sand-bank, but only a ton or two dumped into you to kinder strength your backbone."

"Oh, no, I have all the backbone that is goot for me, mine fr'en!" the old man replied.

And then he made his throw with a trembling hand for he was all excitement.

Out rolled the ivory cubes, two sixes and a five.

A shout of amazement came from California Joe.

"Seventeen, by gosh!" he cried.

"Wa-al, darn me fur a lop-sided mule, if that ain't the best throw, for the fu'st time, that I have seen for a year!"

The Jew gave a chuckle of delight.

The gambler's mania had seized upon him.

"Aha, mine goot fr'en' what do you tho't of dot? How high was it, eh?"

The Fresh of 'Frisco surveyed the dice in quite a sober way.

"Seventeen," he remarked; "well, I must rise to remark that you are in luck. You might throw fifty times and never strike so big a count as that on the first lick."

"Why, say, do you know what the odds are against my beating a throw like that in a single trial?"

"Oh, no, mine fr'en', I am not a gambler—I have not made a study of such a thing, but I know the odds must be large against it."

"About a million to one," Blake observed, with the air of a man who had just completed a heavy calculation in his mind.

"A milli n to one!" almost howled old California Joe; "why, pard, you wouldn't be out of the way if you add ten milli n to one."

"I'm just old death on figurin' and kin rattle off a leetle sum like that in my head in no time!"

"I've got to throw eighteen—three sixes—to beat you, and a man might chuck dice for a week and never strike three sixes."

"I've chuck'd the bones fur a hull year n' any a time and never fetched 'em!" the old plainsman declared.

"Yes, sirree, you kin bet all your wealth onto that!"

And now a sudden fear came into the Jew's mind that the sport might not want to go on with the game, as the odds seemed so great against him, and as we have said the gambling fever had seized upon the old Jew and he hungered to despoil the stranger.

"Maybe you will not want to play, mine goot fr'en', now that I have done so well," he suggested.

"Maybe I had better send out for a ton or two of sand to dump into you to stiffen your backbone."

And the aged Hebrew grinned in a fiendish way in the face of the other.

"You wanted to bet a hundred dollars more, aha! that is betterish goot!"

"I will go you, mine fr'en'! I will go you two hundred dollars more, for when I skin a man I like to take off der hide close to der bones."

"I will go you two hundred dollars more! Come, now, mine fr'en'!"

And the old Jew, producing a canvas bag from a secure hiding-place in his jacket, counted out the gold pieces—twenty dollar ones—and piled them up in a heap on the counter, arranging them with dexterous fingers so as to dazzle the eyes of the sport.

As we have said, the pawnbroker had a terrible attack of the gambling fever, and was very much afraid the American would endeavor to back out of the game now that the chances seemed to be so much against him.

"You are a skin from Skinnerville and no mistake!" the Fresh declared.

"You want to go for me, so I will not have money enough left to get out of the town."

"Oh, do not worry about that. I will lend you enough to carry you as far as the next town, if you should be as ladly off as all dot," the old Jew declared, in an extremely patronizing way.

"Well, I'm going to go you, just for greens!"

Then the Fresh hauled out his money, and proceeded to cover the gold put up by the Jew.

"Seeing that the odds are so big against me, you ought to give me two or three tries," he suggested, as he picked up the dice and the dice-box.

"Oh, mine gootness, no!" cried the old Jew. "You made the terms yourself, and you must not try to back out of them now."

"All right, I suppose I will have to stick, then," Blake remarked, rattling the dice in the box in a lively way.

"Yesh, yesh, you must stick," and old Solomons rubbed his hands gleefully together.

"Come, mine fr'en', come; hurry up! I am in a hurry to collar der boddle."

"Here she goes, then," and with the ease of the experienced player, the Fresh of 'Frisco rolled the dice along the counter.

"Three sixes!" fairly howled old California Joe as the dice came to a halt, and the spots showed.

The Jew stared open-mouthed, hardly able to believe his eyes.

"Aha, the boddle is mine, and I will do the collaring," the Fresh cried, in triumph.

"But I will give you a chance for your white alley. I'll give you six throws, and I'll bet you

two to one in hundreds that you can't show up three sixes."

And with the words the Fresh gathered up the dice and put them into the box.

But the spell was broken, the fever was over, and not anything could possibly tempt the Jew to risk his money again.

"No, no, mine fr'en', I have had enough. It serves me right. I was the biggest kind of a flat to think I could beat a sport like you at your own game," old Solomons remarked, in mournful tones.

"You will not have another try, then?"

"No, no; once caught, twice shy!" replied the other.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BLAKE'S PLAN.

The Fresh laughed good-naturedly as he gathered up the spoils.

"Oh, well, just as you like, of course. I never tempt a man to play if I see that he don't care to go into the game."

"Only I didn't know but what you might want your revenge, you know, and I didn't want to give you a chance to go around town and say that I wasn't willing to do the square thing by you after winning your cash."

"Aha, mine fr'en', I have made a big jackass of myself, I know, but I shall not be a bigger one, and go der town about and tell anybody dot I was fool enough to think I could beat a sport at his own game."

"I was crazy, mine fr'en', dot was the matter with me."

"Ob, Moses! the idea dot a man like mineself stood any chance with a sport who was smart enough to beat Mexican Mike and Red Sancho right in their own places, to say nothing of cleaning out a man like Doc Moses."

"Well, you were undertaking a pretty big contract," the Fresh observed, in a reflective sort of way, "and a man like you ought not to have been taken into camp, but then it is one of the strange facts of this life that shrewd men like yours if do make the biggest kind of blunders sometimes."

"But I will tell you what I'll do, Hadad, seeing that you have been left so badly, I will give you a piece of advice, which will be worth all you have lost, maybe, if you have sense enough to follow it."

"Oh, I am der kind of mans who always takes good advice!" the Jew protested.

"Well, then, just you close your connection with these Red Riders as soon as you can, and you will stand some chance to escape the earthquake."

"The earthquake, mine fr'en'?"

"Yes; when I get on their track and strike them, it will be equal to an earthquake, and when that time comes, you had better look out and stand from under if you don't want to get smashed."

A peculiar look appeared on the face of the Jew.

"Well, well, mine fr'en', I will remember what you say, and I will try to take care of mineself; but let me give you a word of advice."

"Fire away!"

"Maybe when you go to fight the Red Riders you will not find the job as easy as skinning the gamblers."

"Oh, I've bu'sted a dozen such gangs in my time," the Fresh replied in the most careless manner.

"It is easy enough if you only know how to go about it."

And then our hero happened to remember that California Joe's revolvers were in the Jew's possession.

These he redeemed, much to the delight of the old plainsman, who was glad to get his tools back; then the two departed, greatly to the relief of the old pawnbroker, for it was many a long year since anybody had succeeded in getting the better of him in so complete a manner.

"That man is a devil!" the Jew muttered, as the door closed upon his visitors.

"One thing is sure, though. If he stays in El Paso he has not many days to live!"

Once the pair were outside the old Jew's domicile, the two indulged in a hearty laugh.

"Wa-al, now, turn my ban-sols from hyer to nowbar, if you didn't come that rifle as slick as a whistle. If I hadn't see'd it through, I wouldn't have believed it could have been done."

"Why, the old man groaned when you raked in the yaller boys like as if they had been so many pounds of his flesh!"

"Yesh, the old shark was nicely caught; blad, too, pretty freely, but if he hadn't thought he had a sure thing, he would not have taken the bait."

"I reckon that you laid some kind of a trap for him," the old Californian observed, shrewdly. "And that though he seemed to have everything cut and dried for him to win, yet, truly, he didn't stand a ghost of a show."

"You are right from beginning to end," the Fresh admitted, frankly.

"Now I don't set myself up to be a model man—not even a model sport," he continued. "Yet when I am among square men I play a square

game, and no one has ever dared to say a word to the contrary.

"When I fall among thieves, though, I think I am justified in being as big a wolf as the best in the gang."

"That is my code of morals in a nutshell."

"Wa-al, I ain't a gospel sharp, so I don't know as I am able to give a right smart opinion on the subject," California Joe observed with an air of deep reflection. "Yet it seems to me that you ar' bout as near right as you kin be, considering the country you ar' a-travelin' in and the kind of men you meet."

"It is my platform, right or wrong, on which I stand, and when I saw my beautiful tools in the hands of this old wretch and remembered how they had been stolen from me, the idea of paying fifty dollars for them roused my bile and I went in to skin the Jew by appealing to his avarice."

"I offered him what seemed a sure thing, and in his greed he plunged into the snare."

"But how did you work the trick? The thing seemed to me to be as squar' and fair as could be."

"Well, I suppose I am one of the most expert jugglers that exists in the country outside of the professional stage, and even there I never saw but one or two that could beat me in palming."

"I have three sets of dice, all apparently alike, and unless a man was posted about certain secret marks upon them, I would defy the *lame* eyes to tell one from the other."

"One set is 'square,' good honest dice; that is for examination, either before or after the trick is played, if there are any doubts about the fairness of the game."

"The second set is loaded and will throw anything but three sixes, one of the dice being fixed so that by no possibility will the six spot come up."

"The third set will throw three sixes every time and nothing else."

"I see, I see!" and the old plainsman chuckled in great glee, "and you caught the old man by juggling the dice as easy as rolling off a log."

"Right you are!"

"But I say, pard—scuse me for criticising yer game—but wasn't you rather giving yourself away when you told the old Jew how you were going for the Red Riders?"

"Ob, no, that is a part of my plan," the Fresh replied.

"Let me explain."

"I have made up my mind to go for this outlaw gang in a way they will despise, but right in the beginning I am confronted with the problem, how am I to get at the scamps—where will I find them, although I feel pretty certain that some of the gang are right here in El Paso?"

"I tell you that it is the hardest kind of a riddle!" the old scout observed with a wise shake of the head, after thinking the matter over for a moment.

"Yes, and now my game is to make the gang reveal themselves to me."

"I have boasted to the old Jew how I am going to hunt the gang down, let him see that I have a suspicion in regard to their plans. He will report my conversation, of course; the leaders of the gang will take the alarm. Naturally, they will be apt to say, 'Here, this man may become dangerous, and the quicker we get him out of the way the better!'"

"That's so! as sure as ye'r born!" California Joe exclaimed.

"Then some of the gang will be deputed to put me where I can't do any harm."

"Now then, from this time out, if any stranger picks a quarrel with me without reason for so doing, you know, I can safely set him down for being one of the Red Riders, or else a tool employed by the outlaws."

"Oh, it will be mighty apt to be one of their men, for they won't be apt to go outside the band for a band when such work is to be done."

"That is my calculation, and now, from this time forth, we must keep our eyes open for these fellows will jump on us without warning."

"Say! I don't want you to think I am showing the white feather when I remark that I think we two hav taken a mighty big contract on hand in attempting to fight this hyer powerful gang."

"Yes, but it isn't my game for us two to fight a dozen."

"No?"

"Nary time; Providence is always on the side of the heaviest artillery, and other things being even ten men will usually whip five."

"I propose to raise a gang too, and that is the reason w'y I went in to make so big a stake last night."

"Money, as I told you, is the sinews of war. I went in for a big pile so as to be able to pay some good men good prices to enlist under our banner."

"I reckon you can scare six good men up here in El Paso, Americans, whom you know can be depended upon!"

"You bet I can!" the old scout cried, emphatically. "Having been banting round hyer so long I kin put my hands on the very men."

"Fellows who are clean grit all the way through, men you kin tie to, every time!"

"That's the kind I want; for this fight will be apt to be a bloody one in the beginning," the Fresh observed.

"We will have to give the Red Riders a good sound beating before they will understand that they have got hold of a different kind of a gang from the Mexican Greasers whom they usually get away with so easily."

"I kin put my hands on six good men afore night!" the old plainsman cried.

"Six men who wouldn't be afraid to face any kind of odds if they were put to the rack."

"That is the kind of fellows for our money. I will pay a good price too, three dollars a day and found."

"That's fair; they won't grumble at that."

By this time the two had reached the hotel, and they halted in front of it.

"My room is No. 10," said the Fresh. "The first room at the head of the stairs on the second story. Let them come right up to me, and arrange it so as not to send more than one man up at a time, and let them be about half an hour apart."

"All right."

"Take only men you know that you are sure can be trusted. We mustn't have any drunkards or babblers in the party."

"Oh, no, you bet!"

"And while you are hunting up the men I will go and look for a little house for headquarters, but in an hour I will be here ready to inspect the recruits."

With this the two parted.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FIRST RECRUIT.

The Fresh already had his eyes on a place which he thought would answer for a headquarters for his army.

Next door to the hotel was a vacant shanty which an enterprising genius had built for a cigar store, but the speculation did not pay and it had finally fallen into the hands of the hotel landlord.

It was too small for an ordinary business house and so had remained without a tenant.

There was only one small show-window, which at present was protected by a stout shutter, for in a town frequented by so rough a class as that which now "favored" El Paso with their presence, the sight of an empty show-window was altogether too great a temptation for the wild adventurers to resist, and it was the most natural thing in the world for them to pull out their "shooting irons" and fill the window-glass full of holes, just as the idle boys always delight in breaking the windows of unoccupied houses.

After getting his eyes upon the house the Fresh had taken pains to survey "the vantage of the ground."

There was a door in the rear, which was masked by the hotel woodshed, and on the other side of this shanty was an alley which led to the hotel corral, so it was possible to gain admission to the house by the rear door without being exposed to much observation.

Although the shanty was a small one, as we have said, it was amply large enough to give good accommodations to the six men whom the Fresh was going to engage to aid him in fighting his battles.

After satisfying himself by a careful inspection that the shanty would answer, our hero opened negotiations with the landlord, stating that he had met with some old pards and they thought they could reduce their expenses by hiring the shanty and boarding themselves.

The landlord "reckoned" the idea was a good one, and as he was anxious to get the place off his hands a bargain was soon struck.

There was a small stove in the house, an old table, and half a dozen boxes, so there was ample furniture for adventurers who were used to roughing it.

After completing the transaction and receiving the key, the Fresh went up to his room to be in readiness to receive his expected visitors.

Blake had not revealed to the landlord how many pards he expected to join with him in occupying the shanty, for he knew that suspicion would at once be excited; for even in a frontier town like El Paso it isn't common for eight, well-armed, desperate men to bunk together.

Owing to the way in which the shanty was situated though, it would be an easy matter for the occupants of it to either enter or leave, without being likely to attract attention.

Citizens and strangers were lounging about the hotel and passing up and down the alley, which led to the hotel corral, on the other side of the shanty, constantly, and the presence of the adventurers in the neighborhood would not be likely to attract attention.

Before going to his room Blake strolled to the corner and chatted for a while with the man in charge, his object being to ascertain if there was a good stock of horses on hand and how the price ran, for, with the wisdom of a man who was used to such enterprises as this, he knew that his "army" would have to be well-mounted in order to hunt down a marauding band like the Red Riders of Rayon.

Having procured the necessary information, he went to his room and as he passed through

the saloon he noticed three men lounging in the apartment who every now and then glanced at the clock in an expectant way.

"Some of my recruits I reckon," the Fresh observed to himself, and he improved the opportunity to take a good look at the men, for of course they had no suspicion that their business at the hotel was suspected.

"Three likely-looking fellows," was Jackson Blake's comment.

"I reckon they will fill the bill!"

Prompt to the minute there came a knock at the door, and then one of the men whom the Fresh had noticed below, entered.

He was a young fellow, about the medium height and neatly dressed, although his clothes showed signs of hard wear, and from his general appearance the Fresh decided that he was a "sport," "playing in hard luck."

"Room number ten?" said the new-comer, inquisitively.

"Yes, you are in the right place; help yourself to a chair."

The visitor sat down; then he took a good look at Jackson Blake and a smile appeared on his face.

"I was in Doc Moses's last when you skinned the bank," he explained.

"Yes, I managed to worry the tiger a little."

"Well, I wasn't so lucky, the tiger worried me," the other remarked, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"You can't keno every time, you know," the Fresh remarked in a consoling way.

"Oh, I know that, but the deuce of it is that I can't keno at all since I came down into this infernal country."

"You see, I heard there was a boom here at El Paso and thought there would be a good chance for a young man like myself to come in, and grow up with the country, so I gathered all the shekels I could raise and emigrated."

"What is your business?"

"Gambler," answered the other in the most matter-of-fact tones. "I used to clerk, but I was not able to stand the confinement and so I got to be a sport."

"You know how it is yourself, I reckon, for after that little game of yours last night, it would not be of any use for a man like me to try to tell you anything."

"I believe I have been there several times, if not more."

"This climate don't agree with your pocket-book?" the Fresh added.

"No, sir! You can bet high on that! I lost my last dollar last night, and yet I came to El Paso pretty well heeled too, but I am clean down to the bed-rock now, for I have put up everything I could raise a dollar on with the exception of my guns, and I reckon one of them will have to go to-day, unless I strike something, and I hate to do it too, for a man ought to be well heeled in the weapon line in a country like this, for there's no telling when he may need them."

"Yes, and when he does need them, he needs them mighty bad," Blake observed.

"You bet! The fact is I've been so close pushed that I haven't had any breakfast this morning, but it don't worry me much, for I was so discouraged that I got on a little tear last night, and as I am not used to that sort of thing, I feel so upset that I don't believe I could eat a morsel anyway."

"A little of the hair of the dog that bit you is sometimes good for a man's stomach," the Fresh suggested.

"Oh, yes, I know that, and I have had a couple of drinks this morning; but a man can always strike a drink, you know, even if he can't get anything to eat."

"Oh, yes; how may I call your name?"

"Dave Ringwood."

"I suppose California Joe explained matters to you?"

"Yes, in a measure. He said you wanted to pick up some men for a certain enterprise, and were willing to pay a fair price for good men."

"Did he say anything in regard to the nature of the enterprise?"

"No, excepting that a man might be called upon to do a little fighting, and that white-livered galoots with no sand in their claws would not answer."

"That is the truth. The men who go in with me take their lives in their hands."

"Well, as far as that goes, I reckon that about all men who try to follow a sporting life down in this country, go it at that gait," the young man remarked.

"That is all right; I don't mind it a bit; I am ready to go in."

"I am not at all afraid of dying with my boots on; but there's one thing I would like to know, if you don't mind explaining."

"Go ahead! I reckon I can satisfy your curiosity."

"How about the law. Do you calculate to buck up against it? If you do, I reckon you will have to excuse me, for that is something I have never done."

"I am flat broke now, as I told you, and a good many men in my line of business would, under the circumstances, consider themselves

justified in trying to hold up some fellow, and go through him for his wealth."

"That is true enough."

"I will admit the idea came to me, and I wrestled with it some time, but I couldn't go it."

"Oh, I understand. A man must draw the line somewhere."

"Exactly!" cried the young sport, eagerly, "and I draw it at the road-agent business."

"I admit that when it comes to cards I will skin a man out of his eye-teeth, if he is able to stand the pressure, but to take to the highway with my gun is too much."

"Tranquillize your soul, my friend: n.y little game is to be worked inside the law, not outside of it. In fact, we are going in to enforce the law, for the object of my expedition is to destroy a band of marauders who call themselves the Red Riders of Rayon."

"Ah, yes, I have heard of the fellows!" exclaimed Ringwood. "They have been whooping things up pretty lively all along the lower Rio Grande."

"Yes, and I propose to go in with a choice party of picked men, and make things lively for them."

"I have been quite a sportsman in my time, outside of such games as faro, poker, keno and the like," the young man remarked, reflectively, "but I never hunted humans; it seems to me, though, that a man-hunt would be the biggest kind of sport."

"To a man like myself the spice of danger would render it doubly interesting."

Ringwood spoke in a cool, deliberate way, and the Fresh, who was watching him closely, saw that he had got hold of a man who, for all his quiet ways, was as brave as a lion, and as game as a bull-dog.

"How are you on the fight?" the Fresh inquired, in a business-like way.

"Well, I don't know; a man shouldn't praise his own skill, but I can say that I am a pretty good shot with both rifle and revolver, can handle a knife tolerably well, too; but more than all, I am lucky."

"Lucky?"

"Yes; I can't say that I am at cards, but every fight I have got into I have managed to come out the top dog."

"Can you ride?"

"Yes, I'm a good horseman."

"Three dollars a day and found suit you?"

"To a dot! I'm your man!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

SIX GOOD MEN.

The Fresh extended his hand, the other shook it heartily, and the compact was made.

"I have engaged the shanty next door for a headquarters," Blake explained.

"The little store?"

"Yes; you get in by the back door, and you can get at the door either by passing through the saloon down-stairs, and going out the side door, as though you were going to the corral, or you can come through the alley on the other side of the shanty."

"Be careful when you enter to avoid being seen, so that comment may not be excited."

"Of course."

"And now, just wander around town and see what you can do in the way of picking up a good horse; there are some good beasts in the hotel corral, but there may be better elsewhere; and you want a good repeating rifle, too."

"I think I know where both can be obtained at a reasonable price."

"At two o'clock I shall expect to see you in the shanty. It is open now, though, and you can go in at any time after you get through with your search."

"All right," and Ringwood rose to depart.

"By the way, be as silent as the grave regarding the object of our expedition."

"Certainly."

"And keep on the alert for anything you may hear regarding these Red Riders. I have a suspicion that there are parties right in this town of El Paso who are in league with these marauders; in fact, some of the band themselves may be in the town."

"I should not be surprised. The devil lurks always in the shadow of the church, they say, and it is very probable that these outlaws are here in El Paso, cheek by jowl with the men who are paid to hunt them down."

"These Mexicans have mighty queer officials sometimes," Blake suggested.

"So I should judge from what I have seen since I have been in the Mexican land."

"From what I know of the Mexican officials who are stationed at these frontier towns, I am satisfied that a large number of them have itching palms, and they are none too good to wink at the outrages of these marauders, provided they are well paid for so doing."

"Not a doubt of it."

"Well, keep your eyes and ears open, and you may be able to pick up some information."

"There is one man in El Paso who I feel pretty certain is a confederate of the outlaw and that is the old Jew pawnbroker, Hadad Solumons."

Ringwood made a grimace.

"Oho! I fancy you know the man?" the Fresh exclaimed.

"Yes, I do, to my sorrow. He's the fellow that corralled all my valuables, and the old scoundrel wouldn't give me more than a tenth part of their value."

"That is the way to get rich, you know, but if, as I suspect, the old Jew is in with the Red Riders, I may be able to get him on the hip in a way that will make him squeal and, perhaps, force him to disgorge some of his ill-gotten gains."

"I sincerely hope so," and with this remark Ringwood withdrew.

Five minutes after there was a knock at the door and in answer to the "come in" of the Fresh, a tall, muscular, raw-boned, middle-aged man made his appearance.

He was clad in a complete suit of buckskin, very much the worse for wear, and the moment the Fresh set eyes upon him he came to the conclusion that he was an old mountain-man, for he looked it to the life.

"Room number ten—the cap'n who is lookin' arter men?" the stranger questioned.

"Yes, take a chair and make yourself comfortable."

The mountaineer surveyed the Fresh for a moment and burst into a loud guffaw.

"Durn me, if you ain't the very sport w'ot laid Red Sancho out last night!" he cried, and then he extended his brawny hand.

"Put it thar, pard, I owe you one for laying out that miserable cuss! He done clear me out of every ounce of dust I had 'bout me an hour before."

The Fresh shook hands heartily with the other.

"I tell yer! it did my old heart good to see you lay that yaller nigger out; and now I come to think of it, old California was along with you, too, but when he tackled me 'bout a job to-day I never suspicioned that you was the man."

"Californy and I are old pals, you know," the speaker continued.

"We have done a heap of mountain work together in our time."

"Californy is a good man—never had a better pard since I was hatched."

"Oh, yes, Joe is the kind of man to tie to."

"Wa-al, stranger, you will find me white, too, all the way through, and no mistake!"

"My name is John Barker—Big John Barker is the handle that my pals generally stick onto me, and I reckon it fits pretty well, too, seeing as how I am a sizable kind of feller."

"I am a trapper and an old mountain-man from 'wayback, and if you think I'll suit I'm ready to join your train."

"Oh, yes, I reckon you will answer," the Fresh remarked.

And then he put about the same questions to the applicant as he had directed to the sport.

The old plainsman was no gambler, neither was he in hard luck.

He had just come in from a trapping trip to the northern Mexican wilderness and though he had not done as well as he had expected, yet he was tolerably "well-fixed," to use his expression.

He was an expert with all kinds of weapons, could ride like a Comanche brave, and as a master of prairie and mountain knowledge could hold his own with the best of the men who made a living in the wild western wilderness.

He was well-armed and owned a horse.

"Not the handsomest beast you ever looked at," the old trapper remarked with a grin. "He wouldn't take no prize for his beauty at no cattle-show, but, like a singed cat he's a durned sight better than he looks."

"He'll do, I reckon."

And then the Fresh explained the object of his expedition.

Big John listened attentively and after the Californian finished declared that he would be glad to take a hand in such a picnic.

"If that's anything I hate in the world it is these durned Mexican yaller-bellies who go in for skinning good peaceable men!" he remarked.

"I have had considerable trouble with the Greasers in my time and I shall not be sorry to git a chance to git square with some of the cusses."

The Fresh explained about the shanty next door and the trapper said he would be on hand about noon.

Then he commenced to back toward the door, but paused with his hand on the latch.

"Thar's a pard of mine coming to see you," he remarked.

"He's waiting outside now; he's an Irishman but he's all wool and a yard wide. You kin risk him on my say-so! I know him from clear through!"

"All right; tell him to come in, for that is just the kind of men I want."

The old trapper retreated and soon the Irishman made his appearance.

He was a youngish-looking man, rather undersized, with a round, bullet-like head, covered with a shade of bright, red hair.

But although his face betrayed his nationality

beyond a doubt, yet there wasn't anything dull or stupid about the man; on the contrary he looked to be rather above the average in smartness.

He too was a scout and trapper, although of far less experience than Big John Barker as he admitted.

Still, as he said, he thought he could manage to look out for himself in a skirmish.

He was a fair shot and an extra wool rider, having been attached to a racing stable in Ireland in his youth.

The Fresh engaged him and the Irishman departed, highly delighted.

"Three good men," Blake observed as the door closed after the Irishman.

"If I can succeed in picking up three more as good I should not be afraid of facing a small regiment of these Mexicans."

"But unless these fellows who call themselves the Red Riders of Rayon are made of different stuff from what the ordinary Mexican outlaw is composed of, they will not be hungry for war when they find they are confronted by men who know how to fight, and have sand enough to back to their game."

"Decidedly it was a lucky thing that I ran across old California Joe, for without his aid I should not have been likely to have got together so good a force."

A knock at the door interrupted the Fresh's meditations.

And then in obedience to the adventurers command there entered a tall, raw-boned young man, who was tanned almost as dark as an Indian.

He wore the frontier suit of buckskin, it was very much the worse for wear; and from the fashion of the garb, and the big broad-brimmed felt hat pulled down over his for-head, a judge in such matters would have picked him out for a "cow-puncher" as far as he could see him.

The young fellow came right to business.

He was a cowboy out of a job, could ride anything from a bucking broncho to a wild steer, didn't take a back seat with his "guns" for any man on the "range," had been "filled full of lead" two or three times, but stood up to the rack and took his folder like a man without a squeal.

These were strong recommendations and Taos Tom, as he called himself was engaged.

He hadn't a horse or a rifle and was notified to look out for both.

Then the young fellow put in a good word for an old "side-pard" of his, as he said, and forthwith proceeded to introduce him.

Tom Smith the other was called, but, as he explained, he had run across so many Toms and Smiths in the course of his travels that he was seldom called by his right name, as it bred confusion, and usually went by the appellation of the Bucking Angel, or Buck Angel for short.

He had won the name by his skill in subduing "bucking" horses.

A bargain was immediately struck with Buck and then the cowboy pals departed in great glee to hunt up rifles and horses.

"Five good men as I ever ran across!" the Fresh exclaimed, highly delighted with his recruits.

"Now if the sixth man turns out to be as good as the rest, I wouldn't be afraid to take a contract to run this town of El Paso for a night or so, and clear out all the Mexican police or soldiers that could be scared up."

It was about twenty minutes before there came another knock at the door, and this time old California Joe accompanied the applicant, who was a slender, gentlemanly-looking fellow, with a pleasant, rather sober face lit up by a pair of the most innocent blue eyes that were ever seen in a man's head.

But in spite of the man's really ministerial look there was a certain something about him that induced the Fresh to set him down at once for a sport.

"This hyer is an old acquaintance of mine," California Joe remarked as he introduced the stranger. "He used to hang out 'bout ten years ago in San Antone—Pistol Pete!"

The Fresh shook hands with the mild-looking gentleman who bore so strange a name.

"He got that handle 'cos he was so quick on the draw," California Joe explained.

"San Antone was a pretty rough place in those days, and if a sucker got short of his money thar was allers plenty to egg him on to scalp the sharp who took him into camp."

"The suckers were mostly bullwhackers and such like ugly cusses when they got a leetle benzine into 'em, but I reckon none of 'em ever got the drop onto Pete byer."

The sport smiled in a way that was "child-like and bland," and remarked, in his quiet way:

"Well, I was always brought up to take care of myself, but I must admit that those El Paso wolves have been a little too much for me, and I am regularly cleaned out just now."

It was the truth, most decidedly, for the sharp possessed no article of value besides the clothes he wore.

Jewelry, weapons, all were gone, for Pistol Pete was a gambler of the old type, who never

quit a game while he had a cent left to stake.

It did not take long for the Fresh to strike a bargain with the sport, and so he became the sixth recruit.

"Six good men, and you kin bet yer boots on it!" old California Joe declared.

The Fresh assented, and then Joe and Pistol Pete departed to hunt up weapons and a steed.

CHAPTER XXX.

BAFFLED.

AND now that his fighting-men were engaged, the Fresh proceeded to look for a horse and a rifle for his own use.

As he was flush with money, and not particular in regard to the price, as long as he got a good article, he had no difficulty in obtaining an excellent rifle, and a horse fit to trust with a man's life, being a thoroughbred Kentucky animal, a descendant of one of the great four-milers, who not only possessed speed, but bottom also.

It was just two o'clock when the Fresh, after making arrangements for the keeping of his horse at the hotel corral, entered the shanty.

He found his force all assembled, and old California Joe, with the readiness of an old campaigner, having laid in a stock of provisions, had built a fire in the stove, cooked dinner, and the adventurers were enjoying a feast when the Fresh made his appearance.

A place had been reserved for him at the end of the counter which served for a table.

The Fresh had a good appetite, and did full justice to the viands.

After the meal was over he called for a report in regard to the arms and horses.

All those who were without weapons and steeds had succeeded in finding good bargains.

Then to each man Jackson Blake counted out the sum needed for the purchase.

"Now we must have the same discipline, boys, as though we were in an enemy's country, acting against a hostile force," Jackson Blake remarked.

"In my absence California Joe will command, and in case neither Joe or myself are here, one of us will designate a captain to serve.

There are six of you, and each man will serve a four hours' watch, for the shanty must not be left alone, as our rifles and ammunition will be stored here.

"When a man is not on watch, he is at liberty to go where he likes, inside the town, but he must report for duty every three hours.

"It would be well if every man should keep as near to the plaza as possible, so as to be on hand in case of trouble.

"I have caused a report to be circulated that it is my intention to hunt down and destroy these Red Riders of Rayon.

"My idea in giving the scheme away was to goad the outlaws into attacking me here in the town, so as to give me a chance to see who they are."

All the adventurers nodded, for in their opinion this was an extremely shrewd dodge.

"So, if you see that there is any disposition on the part of any two or three men to pick a quarrel with me—for it isn't likely, after the taste of my quality that the citizens of El Paso got when I laid Red Sancho out, that any one man will care to try it on—you want to gather around and be ready for a skirmish."

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to arrange a signal, so we could determine when the time was ripe for an interference—that is, I mean, a signal to come from you, and which would only be understood by us?" suggested Ringwood.

"Yes," responded the Fresh. "The idea is a good one, and will prevent any mistake from being made."

"When I say, 'I don't want to have any difficulty,' take that as the signal.

"The moment you hear the word *difficulty*, cut with your guns and do your level best. Of course, fire over the heads of your men, unless it is absolutely necessary to plug them; generally, though, in such a case, the pulling of the guns and the discharge, even though the bullets don't do any damage, will stampede the crowd.

"I have made arrangements to have the horses stabled at this end of the corral.

"I told the boss hostler a ghost story about going into the horse business, and said I had taken a few on trial; so when you go there with your animals, ask for me, and say you have brought the horse on trial."

Again the adventurers nodded as token that they comprehended.

With men of acuteness, as all these recruits were, lengthy explanations were not needed.

One by one the adventurers sauntered out—the ones who were obliged to procure arms and horses—but in a short time all were back again, carrying their rifles with them and stating that the horses were safe in the corral.

Then old California Joe examined the weapons, in order to see what cartridges were required.

As it happened, two sizes of cartridges did for the eight rifles, and the plainsman started out to

procure a supply, all of them being well provided with revolver cartridges.

It was late in the afternoon before the arrangements were made, for blankets also had to be provided, so the "soldiers" could arrange comfortable bunks for the night.

Then the time passed quickly away until supper was prepared, and after this meal was dispatched, the adventurers smoked and told stories of wild happenings, until the shadows of the night covered the town.

One man was then left on watch—it was Dave Ringwood—and the rest sallied forth.

Being early there was not much going on; the army had separated upon leaving the headquarters, going off in pairs.

Jackson Blake and old California Joe strolled into the Hotel Mexico and great was their amazement when they heard the loungers there discussing the arrival of the two beautiful Escobedo girls.

Thinking that there might be some mistake the Fresh took the pains to carefully inquire into the matter, and soon satisfied himself that the ladies of whom the hotel loungers spoke were no others than the two who had been his companions in the stage.

The Fresh was bothered, with all his shrewdness, by this unexpected discovery.

"Where the deuce have they been?" he remarked, to old California Joe.

"What is the little game, anyhow?"
"Here they are, safe and sound, and I have been raising an army to rescue them from the hands of these Red Riders, for I hadn't any doubt that they had been captured by the outlaws."

The old plainsman shook his head.
"You are too much for me, cap'n, I give it up!" he exclaimed.

"Hang me if I don't get an interview with them in the morning and ask the question."

"Mebbe they'll hint that it ain't no business of yours," the old mountain-man remarked, with a grin.

"Maybe they will; that black-eyed one would be quite capable of doing such a thing, but I would get better treatment from the other," the Fresh rejoined.

"Yes, I reckon you would; she's a reg'lar-built lady, she is!"

The evening passed away without anything worthy of notice occurring, although the Fresh and his "army" visited all the principal resorts of the town.

In the morning, Blake waited until about nine o'clock, so as to make his call upon the ladies at a seasonable hour, and then proceeded to the Hotel Mexico.

His disappointment was great when he learned that the pair, in company with Judge Bullifant, had departed for the Escobedo Ranch, down the Rio Grande, near Ysleta, early that morning.

"Waal, the game is kindered blocked, ain't it?" suggested California Joe when the pair got into the street again.

"Yes, and I reckon we'll have to shake El Paso, too, for if the heiress has gone to her ranch, there will not be anything for us to do here.

"The Red Riders are after the girl, she is worth two or three million, they say, and they would like to get hold of some of it.

"I feel sure there is a plot, you know, but it is such a mighty deep one that I can't get on to it at all, as the detectives say."

"But we will go down the Rio Grande too. We'll split our party up in sections and for the time being we will be speculation hunters, crazy to make a pile in cattle or land."

But the Fresh was destined to tarry some time yet in El Paso's time, as the reader will see anon.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A SURPRISE.

ALTHOUGH both Jackson Blake and California Joe were men who always kept their eyes "wide open," and were quick to see all that passed around them—a habit which came from the life of adventure which both of them led—yet on the present occasion neither one was sharp enough to detect that they were being watched.

True, the watcher was only a bare-footed peon—one of the tame Indians, so common in Mexico.

He was slouching along in his rags, smoking a cigarette after the usual fashion of the dwellers in the land, and watched the pair from the time they came out of the hotel, through which they passed in order to mask their leaving the shanty, until they came to the Hotel Mexico.

Then, when he saw them in the hotel saloon, busy in conversation with the lawyers, he hurried down the plaza and disappeared in one of the small streets leading from the square.

But by the time that the two got through with their conversation and came to the street, the peon was on the watch again.

When the pards started to retrieve their steps, going toward the other hotel, the peon sauntered on about fifty feet ahead of them, but the fellow performed his task so well that neither of the two suspected that he had been dogging their footsteps.

At the first street the peon left the plaza, casting a careless glance over his shoulder, so as to be sure that the two Americans were close behind him, then he went down the street.

The pards had noticed the man, of course, but tame Indians, in rags, puffing away leisurely at cigarettes, are altogether too common in all Mexican towns to excite any particular attention, so the peon's presence or his disappearance did not excite any apprehension in the minds of the adventurers.

They strolled along, busy in conversation, until they came to the corner of the street down which the Indian had gone, and then they were suddenly surprised by the rush of a dozen men who had been waiting in ambush just around the corner.

The men were the police of the town, headed by the chief in person, Jose Parral.

The attack was so entirely unexpected that the pards were taken unawares, but, in spite of this fact, they struck out like regular bruisers, there not being time for them to draw a weapon before the foe was upon them.

Both Blake and old California Joe were handy men with their fists, and four men went down before their sledge-hammer-like blows in a twinkling, but there were too many of the Mexicans, and the surprise was too complete to allow the pards to successfully withstand their foes.

The police closed in upon the Americans, and the peon, with true savage cunning, dodged behind the pards and tripped them up.

Although the Fresh and California Joe were prostrate upon the earth, with the Mexicans on top of them, yet they made a tremendous resistance.

The police finally got lariats around their bodies, and the contest came to an end.

Although the struggle only took a few moments, yet quite a crowd had collected by the time it ended, and, as ill-luck would have it, not a single one of the army was in the throng.

The captured men were helped to their feet by the police and conducted without loss of time to the alcalde's court.

The alcalde, a tall, raw-bone Mexican, with a forbidding expression, was in his chair, all ready for business, and when the Americans were hurried before him, did not seem to be in the least surprised.

Then it flashed into the minds of the prisoners that this attack had been carefully planned beforehand, and that they had little mercy to expect from the judge.

The alcalde was called Miguel Parral and was a brother of the captain of police.

Rumor did not give either of them the best of characters, and more than one ugly tale, regarding the willingness of either one of the officials to make money by secret and underhand means, were current.

The crowd followed the prisoner into the court-room, and at the tail end of the throng came Dave Ringwood, who had chanced to come into the plaza just in time to see the crowd entering the so-called temple of justice; and curiosity led him to see what was the matter, not having the slightest suspicion, though, that any of his friends or acquaintances were concerned in the trouble.

The moment that he managed to get inside the court-room, so as to be able to see what was going on, the truth flashed upon him.

The attack which the Fresh had expected had been made, although the trick was worked in a manner totally unexpected.

After making the discovery, Ringwood was in as great a hurry to get out as he had been to get in.

Both the Fresh and old California Joe had their eyes on the crowd as it surged into the apartment.

They hoped to catch sight of one of the adventurers.

Ringwood's presence did not escape their keen eyes, and when they saw him force his way out through the crowd they understood he had gone to warn the "army."

But as both of them had perfect command over their features they were careful not to betray that they had caught sight of a friend in the crowd.

There were twenty-five or thirty people congregated in the not particularly spacious apartment, and there were only three or four Americans present, the rest being citizens of the town, and the greater part of them men of the lowest class, hangers-on to the various Mexican gambling houses, fellows who have a deadly hatred to the "North Americans," as they indiscriminately termed all foreigners.

So, as the prisoners looked upon the gathering they were greeted with hostile glances, almost every Mexican in the room scowling at the prisoners in an extremely ugly way.

During the bustle which occurred after the pair were placed in the prisoner's box, while the Mexican police with their drawn pistols were forcing back the crowd who manifested an idea of taking possession of every foot of standing room in the apartment, the Fresh and California Joe had an opportunity to exchange a few words without danger of being overheard.

"Well, Joe, what do you think of this?" the Fresh asked.

"Pard, they hev played it on us in a way I despise!" the old mountain man answered.

"You see, I was right in my surmise that by letting it become known I was going for the Red Riders, I would bring an attack upon me."

"You bet!"

"But the outlaws are more crafty fellows than I thought, for I never even suspected they would rope the police of the town and the alcalde into the business."

"Oh, they are pisoned snakes, and you kin bet high on it!"

"You noticed Ringwood?"

"You bet!"

"He's gone for assistance, and though these fellows undoubtedly think they have got us foul we may be able to show them a trick which will make them open their eyes before we get through with them."

"Yes, I reckon that when our boyees git a good ready on and go for there Greasers, they will be apt to scatter them a leetle."

"Do you notice that about all the men in the room are fellows who hang out 'round these low Mexican dens?"

"That's so; the worst bummers in the town!"

"Their presence here may be just accidental, of course, but I don't think it is. I reckon this thing was all cut and dried beforehand."

"This thing was carefully planned and these fellows were instructed to be on hand, so as to crowd the court-room and keep decent men out."

"They calculated that if eight or ten Americans happened to get in here they would be apt to raise a row if they saw we wasn't getting justice, and they fixed it so as to pack the court-room with this rabble so as to keep decent citizens out."

"I reckon you have got the thing down 'bout as fine as it can be worked, but, I say, what charge do you think they are going to bring ag'in' us?"

"I guess it will be for an assault on that Red Sancho."

"Show! you don't s'pose the galoots will go for to attempt to kick up a row 'bout a fair fight like that ar' skirmish was!" California Joe exclaimed, indignantly.

"I've seen a heap of fights in my time and I never see'd a fairer one than that one was, never!"

"Their little game is to give a dog a bad name and then hang him."

"They think they have us foul," the Fresh continued.

"I will admit that I didn't anticipate this move, but now that it is made they have shown their hand, and I am sure I can guess their game as well as though I had the planning of it."

"They will charge us with having attempted to murder Red Sancho—"

"Why, the galoot was as eager for the fuss as you was—it was the squarest kind of a skirmish!" California Joe interrupted.

"That doesn't matter," the Fresh replied. "They will be able to get plenty of witnesses among this low rabble who will swear that I assaulted the scoundrel without any provocation being given by him."

"The alcalde will not listen to my defense, but will promptly find us guilty, I, for committing the assault, and you for being an accomplice; then he will sentence us to a long term in jail."

"That will give them an excuse to remove our weapons; we will be locked up in a miserable cell and some night a party of fellows will go for us, and the next morning the news will be made public that we have committed suicide."

"The darned scoundrels!" cried the old trapper.

"But, thanks to our 'army' we'll beat their game."

"Order in the court!" roared the alcalde at this moment, and the conversation ended.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE TRIAL.

By this time the police had succeeded in getting the crowd back from the end of the room where the alcalde's desk was placed and when the Mexican official roared out for order the court-room immediately became quiet.

The alcalde fixed his stern eyes upon the Americans, and when he saw that neither one of them seemed to be in the least affected by their position he scowled in a malignant way.

"Well, what have you to say for yourselves?" he exclaimed, harshly.

The Fresh looked at California Joe, and the old mountain-man looked at the Fresh.

"Say, pard, s'pose you go ahead and do the talking," suggested the plainsman.

"I reckon your tongue is a heap more limber than mine."

"All right, just as you say," replied the Fresh.

And then, turning his attention to the Mexican official, he said, with a polite bow:

"Excuse me, what did you say?"

The frown on the brow of the alcalde deepened,

and the spectators looked at each other in wonder, as if not knowing how to account for the coolness of the prisoners.

"I asked you what you had to say for yourselves!" the alcalde exclaimed in an angry tone.

"Well, we are pretty well, thank ye, and I hope you are the same!" responded the Fresh with his blandest smile.

Again the listeners stared at each other, while the face of the official became dark with rage.

"Have a care—have a care how you attempt to jest with me!" he cried, his voice fairly hoarse with passion.

"I am the Alcalde of El Paso and we have dungeons and chains here for prisoners who try to deride the dignity of this court."

It was now the Fresh's turn to assume an air of intense astonishment.

"Upon my word, alcalde, I don't know what on earth you are talking about!" he retorted.

"I am not trying to deride the dignity of your court. You asked me what I had to say for myself, and I, supposing that, with the natural politeness of the Mexican race, you were inquiring after my health, replied in the same spirit.

"There isn't any jesting about the matter as far as I can see."

"Young man, don't you know that you are brought before me accused of a very serious charge?" the Mexican official demanded in his sternest manner.

"I should like to know how I can be aware of it when no one has said a word about the matter?" the Fresh replied.

"Well, you know it now!"

"Yes, I know that you say so, but I haven't the least idea in regard to the nature of the charge."

"Bosh! this pretended ignorance will not help you any. You know very well what crime you have committed since coming to El Paso."

"Well, I have managed to rake a few dollars out of some of your sharps here, but I didn't know that gambling was considered a particularly serious crime in El Paso."

"How about your attempt to assassinate Red Sancho?" cried the alcalde, with uplifted finger, shaking it warningly at the prisoner.

The Fresh laughed right in the face of the stern official, and this levity called forth a reviving growl from the police and the majority of the spectators.

"Say, judge, I reckon you didn't witness that little picnic, did you?" the American queried.

"No, I did not!"

"For if you did, you would never get off any fool talk about assassination. It was the squarest kind of a fight."

"The man had every chance in the world; why, I reckon there must be a half-a-dozen in the room now who saw the skirmish and they will testify it was a fair fight from beginning to end."

"If I hadn't plugged him he would have plugged me, and that is all there is to it."

"Your Honor, I have three witnesses here who will testify that Red Sancho was shot by this man without being allowed any chance to defend himself!" cried the captain of police, Jose Parral, the alcalde's brother, who was a medium-sized, thick-set man, with even an uglier face than his relative possessed.

"That is a lie from beginning to end!" old California Joo exclaimed, at this point, unable to restrain his indignation.

"Be silent!" commanded the alcalde, in his harshest tones.

"Your evidence will not be received, for you are accused of aiding this man to commit the crime."

"You ain't a-going to give us no show for our money, nohow, ar' ye!" growled the old plainsman.

"Bring forward your witness, captain," said the alcalde.

Then Jose Parral beckoned to a fellow in the crowd, a man with a regular hang-dog look.

The Mexican came forward, and took a position by the alcalde's desk, bowing lowly to the official as he did so.

"Pedro Ramos, I know you to be an honest man," observed the alcalde, "and I therefore depend upon you to give me a true account of how this bloody-minded American assaulted the worthy citizen, Red Sancho."

"Yes, yes, senor, you shall have the truth!" the man protested, and then he proceeded to tell his tale, which from the ready way in which he told it, had evidently been carefully studied beforehand.

According to his account, the two Americans had come into Red Sancho's saloon, won his money by some cunning "Gringo" trick, and when he protested against it, they had drawn their weapons, Sancho fled to the street, they pursued and the younger of the prisoners had shot him in the most bloodthirsty way without giving him any chance for his life.

"You see your guilt is proved beyond the shadow of a doubt!" the alcalde exclaimed, sternly, to the adventurer.

"How proved? by the evidence of this unmitigated liar!" exclaimed the Fresh. "Why, his story is false from beginning to end, with the

exception of the statement that I won money in Red Sancho's saloon!"

"There are two other witnesses who will swear that he attacked Red Sancho without giving him any chance for his life!" the captain of police exclaimed at this point.

"Two more liars to support the first!" the Fresh retorted.

"See here, alcalde, if you intend to give me any show in this matter, let me send for witnesses who saw the affair."

"There must be at least a half a dozen unprejudiced men who saw the fight and will testify that it was a fair contest, as I have stated."

"These witnesses of whom you speak are probably Americans," said the alcalde, with a sneer.

"Yes, I reckon the most of them are."

"Men who will be apt to swear to anything, of course, to get you, a countryman, out of this difficulty."

"No, they will tell you the truth, and that is what you will not get from witnesses like this fellow," and with utter contempt expressed both in voice and face, the adventurer pointed to the Mexican, who glared at him in sullen rage.

At this point a Mexican, who was a little better dressed, and appeared decidedly more respectable than the man who had testified, pushed his way through the crowd.

"I am the doctor!" he announced, "and I have just come from Red Sancho's bedside!"

"Aha!" cried the alcalde, and he fixed his black, glittering, head-like eyes upon the newcomer, "and how is your patient, doctor?"

"Very low; I do not think the man has two hours of life left!"

This intelligence created a decided sensation in the court-room, and all craned their necks to get a look at the man, who was a stranger.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the Fresh, in the most confident way, "the fellow is worth a dozen dead men."

"I know, as a rule, where I put my bullets, and when I layed Red Sancho in the dust, I didn't fire to kill. If I had, he would never have known what hurt him after my bullet struck him."

"Your patient is near death's door, then?" the Mexican official asked, paying no attention to the speech of the American.

"Yes, senor."

"Aha, I think you are in a bad place, my man," the alcalde observed to the Fresh.

"If the man dies, it doesn't matter whether you killed him in a fair fight or secretly assassinated him; you will have to answer for his death all the same."

"You will find that on Mexican soil you cannot kill a man and not be punished for the crime."

"Ob, that is all bosh!" the Fresh retorted. "You know well enough that there has been a dozen men killed in El Paso in street fights during the last six months, and no man has ever been convicted of murder yet! Anyhow, I reckon you can't decide the case until the man dies, and then I'll have a regular trial."

"Of course; we are not murderers; you will be sure to receive justice, and until that time I will commit you to prison."

"Yes, I thought that would be your little game," the Fresh observed.

"I think I know just how you are working this scheme."

"I am getting a little hot on the trail, eh? And when the bloodhound comes dangerously near, the best way to throw him off the scent is to kill him."

Despite their strong powers of self-control, the brothers—the alcalde and chief of police—could not help exchanging glances, for they were profoundly astonished by the speech.

"You have opened the game well, and taken the first trick, there isn't the least doubt about that, and I am willing to acknowledge being taken by surprise, but now I am on my guard. I know how you are going to play, and if I don't beat you at your own game, it will be because the men who compose the outlaw band known as the Red Riders of Rayon are smarter than I think they are."

The crowd was astonished at the speech, and the alcalde and captain of police visibly troubled.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A BOLD DASH.

THERE was an awkward pause for a few moments, and then the alcalde exclaimed:

"By your speech, I should judge that you were either drunk or mad!"

"These outlaws of whom you speak have nothing to do with the action of this court."

"Oh, haven't they?" the Fresh questioned, in a tone which betrayed great doubt.

"You are not trying, then, to aid them by locking me up?"

"Most decidedly not; the idea is absurd! I am the Alcalde of El Paso, and if I could get my hands upon any member of this outlaw band, I would lock them up as quickly as I lock up a dangerous man like yourself."

"Well, I am glad to hear it, for when I suc-

ceed in capturing any of the Red Riders I will know where to bring them."

"You had better wait until you get out of jail yourself," the captain of police observed in a sneering way.

"Oh, I will not stay long in jail," the Fresh replied in his airy, confident way.

"As soon as my friends learn that I am in trouble, they will rally 'round and bail me out."

"Your friends!" exclaimed the alcalde, in surprise.

"Why, I did not know that you had any friends in El Paso. I thought you were a stranger here."

"That is true enough," the adventurer answered; "but a man like myself, a bird of passage, has friends everywhere."

"I tell you what it is, alcalde, I am like a cat: I drop on my feet every time!"

"Just as soon as my friends learn that I am in difficulty, the way they will come forward will be astonishing."

"Just send a message to that worthy Jew pawnbroker, Hadad Solomons, that I am in a hole, and see how the old man will run, fit to break his neck, to help me out."

Again a perplexed look appeared on the faces of the Mexican brothers, for the confident tone of the other amazed them.

"Put my bail at any reasonable figure, and you can bet all you're worth that he will raise the money," the Fresh continued.

"A man who is likely to be tried for murder cannot be admitted to bail," the alcalde remarked.

"Yes, but until the man is dead, you cannot try me for murder, and I tell you the man isn't at all likely to die."

The Fresh was merely talking now for the purpose of gaining time.

He knew that Ringwood upon discovering that his pards were in the hands of the Mexicans had hurried away for the purpose of getting the adventurers together, and although since the sport had disappeared in the doorway, he had not seen anything of him, yet he had confidence that he and his companions were somewhere in the neighborhood, for time enough now had elapsed to enable him to warn the others and get back to the alcalde's office, but the Fresh delayed the proceedings as much as possible, so as to be sure his men would be in readiness in the street when his captors should attempt to convey him from the alcalde's office to the jail.

Our hero had faith that Ringwood would plan the rescue all right.

Nothing could be done though while the examination was going on in the alcalde's office, for the crowd was so great that it would be impossible for the rescuing party to get anywhere near the prisoners.

"Whether Red Sancho will live or die is a question which the future alone can decide," the alcalde observed, "but until the matter is settled we will keep both you and your companion safely locked in jail, and your fate may be a warning to the rest of your countrymen to be careful how they use their weapons while they are in El Paso."

"Captain, take the prisoners to the jail!"

With the word the police closed around the two Americans.

As both were tightly bound with stout lariats the Mexicans did not take the trouble to search the prisoners and remove their weapons, a fact which greatly pleased the pards, for in the event of a rescue they would be able to help the attacking party the moment their bonds were removed.

"Give way there and allow us to pass!" cried the captain of police.

The crowd fell back and hurried into the street.

The police followed the throng, Jose Parral at their head, and the prisoners in the center.

All filed out into the street with the exception of the alcalde and a few of his cronies who stopped to talk with him about the "vile Gringos."

The moment that the pards crossed the threshold of the office they saw that their companions were on hand.

There was a crowd of forty or fifty people in the street and the six adventurers were scattered among the crowd.

After leaving the building the chief of police marched his force into the middle of the street, and the adventurers were quick to cluster around.

There were ten or fifteen Americans in the throng besides the members of the Fresh's band, and they scowled in an ugly way when they saw two of their countrymen in the custody of the police.

The captain of police noted the angry faces, but as he had a dozen men, with drawn revolvers, guarding the prisoners he had little fears of a rescue.

Still he thought it wise to let the "Gringos" in the crowd know that he was prepared for war.

"If any man comes near the prisoners shoot him on the spot!" he exclaimed, brandishing his cocked revolver to give emphasis to the words.

"Oh, that's all right!" the Fresh cried, having come to the conclusion that the present opportunity for a rescue was as good as would be likely to occur, and so was prompt to avail himself of the chance. "There will not be any trouble; we do not want to have any difficulty!"

Hardly had the words escaped from the lips of Jackson Blake, when, simultaneously, the adventurers made a rush for the police force, yelling at the top of their lungs and discharging their weapons.

The attack was so sudden, and so entirely unexpected, that both police and bystanders were panic-stricken.

The people scampered in all directions as fast as they could run.

In order to avoid the yelling and, apparently, infuriated men in their rear, the fellows who were in the immediate vicinity of the prisoners rushed madly in among the police and destroyed their formation, and so great was the tumult and so bewildered were the Mexican guards by the strange affair that they did not attempt to prevent their lines from being broken.

The adventurers, pressing to one common point from all sides, had the prisoners surrounded and snatched out of the power of the Mexicans before the latter were conscious of what they were about.

Then, a couple of slashes of a keen-edged bowie-knife, and the Fresh of 'Frisco and old California Joe were free men.

The severed lariats dropped to the ground, and, in a twinkling, the revolvers of the pair were in their hands.

The police, carried away by the headlong rush of the panic-stricken bystanders, and not averse to going either, for they were demoralized by the sudden attack, were fully fifty feet away before they recovered from the alarm sufficiently to understand what had happened.

Then the captain of police, who had been fully as startled as any of his men, realized that the prisoners had been rescued, and he called upon his men to rally.

"The prisoners have escaped!" he cried, "and we must recapture them!"

"On to the attack!" he commanded, brandishing his revolver.

"Give it to them, boys, since they will have it!" exclaimed Jackson Blake to his men, when he saw that a conflict could not be avoided.

The Americans were slowly retreating down the street toward their headquarters, for it was not the game of the Fresh to have a street fight with the Mexican police if it could be avoided.

Still he could not afford to allow himself to be recaptured, if he had to slay every man in the opposing force.

The Americans opened fire just as the police began to discharge their weapons, but the clumsy Mexicans were no match for their foes, all picked men, who knew what they were about, and were as cool and calculating as though they were in the target field.

The Mexicans were nervous and confused, their fire was irregular and their aim bad, the bullets whistling high over the heads of their antagonists, while the adventurers, by their leader's order, fired low.

"Disable, boys, and don't kill if possible!" the Fresh commanded.

The result of the single volley—the Americans firing as steadily as soldiers on parade—was that five of the Mexicans went down before it, and one of the five was the captain of police, Jose Parral.

The rest broke and fled like a flock of frightened sheep.

They had all the fight they craved for the present.

"I reckon we will have to mount our steeds and dust, boys," the Fresh remarked, as he saw that the contest was ended.

"This night's work will make El Paso too hot to hold us, for though we can stand off fifty to a hundred of these Mexicans yet we can't hope to fight the whole town.

"So, to the corral, boys, and mount as fast as possible! California and Barker, bring the rifles and supplies out of the house, Taos and Buck bring up the horses, while the rest will stay with me to check pursuit!"

But the panic-stricken Mexicans had no idea of attempting to attack the desperate "Gringos" at present, so the adventurers were able to get their horses, removed all their supplies and ammunition from the headquarters, storing them away in the capacious saddle-bags, and then, taking advantage of the back streets, the party rode down to the river and crossed the Rio Grande.

"Now that we are on American soil I defy all the power of Mexico!" the Fresh cried.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE FRESH PLANS.

Now that the Americans were across the Rio Grande and on their own soil, they knew there was little danger that the Mexicans would attempt to pursue them, not that fellows of the stripe of the alcalde and chief of police would hesitate for a moment about crossing the stream and pursuing their prey on American soil, but the chances were against their being able to raise a force large enough to hope to recapture

the fugitives, besides there was the difficulty in getting upon the right track if the Americans chose to retreat rather than fight.

After crossing the river the party avoided the American settlement, and pushed on down the river until they found shelter in a timber belt.

Then the Fresh drew rein and commanded a halt.

Realizing that there was danger, though, that pursuit might be given, the adventurer posted a couple of pickets so as to guard the approach to the grove.

All had dismounted and began with true frontier care to make themselves as comfortable as possible.

The Fresh and old California Joe withdrew to one side, for the purpose of holding a consultation.

"Well, we are through with El Paso for the present, as far as the Red Riders are concerned," our hero remarked.

"I had an idea that my dodge would make the outlaws show their hand, but I had no suspicion that I was flying at so high game as the captain of police and alcalde."

"Wa-al, pard, them Parrals hev never been counted on as amounting to much; 'most everybody allers allowed they were a pair of bad eggs."

"There's no doubt about that. They are in with the outlaws, and no mistake!"

"Now, then, let us look ahead a bit. As I said, we are through with El Paso, for after this skirmish to-day we would have the whole town after us if we dared to show our faces in the streets.

"Therefore the scene of action changes to the neighborhood of the Escobedo Ranch. If the outlaws' game is to make money out of the young heiress, and I believe it is, they will be found in the vicinity of her home."

"Sure as ye'r born! You kin bet high on that!" California Joe exclaimed.

"We must find a bunking-place somewhere in the neighborhood of the ranch.

"One big advantage we possess is, that though you and I are, probably, well-known to the band, it is pretty certain that our men are not, so a couple of our fellows can either get employment at the ranch itself, or in the immediate neighborhood, so as to be able to post us in regard to all that goes on."

"Oh, yes, thar will not be any difficulty in arranging that ar', I should think."

"That is our game; to remain in concealment near the Escobedo Ranch, and, when the Red Riders make a move, strike them."

"Yes, come a leetle surprise-party onto 'em."

"I said we had got through with El Paso for the present, but I was wrong about that, for there's a little bit of business in the town that we must attend to before we quit this neighborhood."

California Joe reflected for a moment, and then the idea came to him:

"You are squinting at the money that you left in the hands of that ar' German banker?"

"That is it; when I made the deposit I had no idea that I was going to be run out of the town in this unceremonious way, for if I had the slightest suspicion that such a thing would occur, I would have held on to the cash."

"I s'pose it is all right and safe," the plainsman remarked, reflectively, with a rather doubtful glance at the Fresh.

"Well, my opinion is that it would be a deuced sight safer if I had it in my own possession," the other rejoined.

"I hev allers heered the galoot spoken of as being a good, squar' man."

"Yes, but good, square men slip up when there's a chance to gobble a few thousand dollars without any risk, and some of these Germans are mighty tricky."

"That's so, that's so," California Joe remarked.

"Now look at the case as it stands: suppose this banker should make the discovery that the man who deposited the money with him was the same American who was run out of the town after a fight with the police?

"We had to hurt some of those Mexicans, you know, and the fellow understands that I would not dare to come in my own proper person and claim my money."

"Right you ar'l!"

"Under the circumstances, then, if he is at all inclined to be a rascal, he will say to himself: 'Why cannot I hold on to this money since the owner will never dare to come openly and claim it?'"

"You might sign yer claim over to some other feller, though, and have him collect it," the old scout suggested.

"Yes, but the money would not be forthcoming, all the same, for in that case the banker would undoubtedly give information to the alcalde, and the money would be seized by him through some law process, then he and the banker would whack up together."

"Durn me if you ain't right!" California Joe exclaimed. "And it kinder looks as if the dust was gone up the spout, unless you play some kind of a quick, bold game."

"That is exactly what I calculate to do. I

do not intend to let any grass grow under my feet, for I am going to strike the banker for my money this very night."

"It ain't hardly possible that the alcalde kin git ahead of you," the other remarked, reflectively.

"Oh, no; he will have his hands full to-day with planning to get at me, for it will take him some time to find out where we have gone. Our dodge of going to the southwest, as though we intended to find refuge in the Lagoon Santa Maria country, then circling around to cross the Rio Grande, will be sure to throw him off the track at first."

"Yes, yes, it was a cute dodge."

"Then, too, the chances are big that no one in the town knows I have made a deposit with the German."

"It was early in the day when I called upon him, no one was there, and it is not likely that my business was suspected, if any one saw me enter."

"Most assuredly, too, the banker is not the kind of man to say anything about it, for I can tell from his looks that he is one of the close-mouthed style."

"I accounted for the possession of the money, too, by saying in a careless way, that I had come to El Paso, understanding there was a boom in the cattle business, and thought there was a chance for a man with a little capital to make a pile, and as I was tired of store-keeping I felt like a little speculating."

"Yes, yes, I see."

"Now if the banker doesn't know that I am the man who got into trouble, he will pay the money over without question, for I shall offer to pay him for his trouble."

"If he has discovered that I am the fellow about whom all the rumpus was kicked up to-day, the chances are big he will come to the conclusion that I will never be able to come back after the money, and so he will be so much in pocket, and most surely he is going to keep the matter quiet, for he will not be willing to share the plunder with anybody."

"That's good sound sense in what you say, and that's no two ways 'bout it," California Joe observed, with an approving nod.

"Now then, I must strike him to-night—strike him before he has time to plan how he will defend the money in case I come after it in a secret way."

"You bet! Allers strike when the iron is hot!"

"The banker lives right in the rear of his shop, which is on the plaza, you know."

"He has a handsome place, with a large garden running back to an alley in the rear."

"The garden is surrounded with a 'doby' wall, and in the rear is a gate, opening into the alley."

"In the garden is a big English bull-dog, which is always on the watch, day and night. I noticed the brute when I was transacting my business with the banker, and he said he had no fear of thieves breaking in his place as long as the dog was there."

"Just by accident, too, I learned a few things about the banker's habits in the course of my conversation with him."

"In the evening he goes to the Hotel Mexico and has a quiet game of cards with a few chums, getting back to his own quarters about eleven."

"He's an old bachelor, and keeps house with the assistance of two servants, who are also German, like himself."

"Now we must leave the horses on the outskirts of the town in some convenient clump of timber; then, through the back streets, we can, in the darkness, get to the alley without danger of being discovered by any one who will be apt to recognize us."

"The bulidog must be got out of the way, then the two servants secured, and when the banker comes home he will find me in readiness to do business with him."

"He may pay over the money without trying to make any trouble about it, you know, but my idea is to so fix things that he will have to pay the cash whether he likes it or not."

"Sart'in! that's the game; allers go in for a sure thing, when you kin."

"Well, when I spring this trap on my friend, the German banker, I rather think he will come to the conclusion that I have got a pretty sure thing of it."

Then the two fell to discussing the details of the plot, and arranging all the particulars so that that there would not be any hitch in the actual workings of the scheme.

The party remained in the grove until the shades of night descended thick and heavy over the earth, then they mounted their horses, rode up the stream, and again crossed the Rio Grande to the Mexican shore.

They pursued the same tactics which they had so successfully employed on their retreat, circling around the town and approaching it from the southwest.

Just on the outskirts of the town they came upon a deserted, tumble-down ranch, and in the corral of this ranch the horses were put, also the rifles, and Big John Barker left to guard them, when the party finally made their move on the town, which was not until about ten o'clock.

Soon the adventurers, in pairs, were in the streets of El Paso.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A FINANCIAL TRANSACTION.

PISTOL PETE, being a quiet, sly fellow, and one not likely to attract attention, was dispatched to the Hotel Mexico to see if the banker was busy at cards with his cronies.

In fifteen minutes he was back with the intelligence that the German was thus pleasantly engaged.

Then the party stole noiselessly into the extremely dark alley which ran at the back of the banker's garden.

The 'doby wall was about seven feet high, but by the aid of Buck Angel's hard back, Taos Tom mounted to the top with the spryness of a cat.

The noise made by the cowboy attracted the attention of the bull-dog, who was at the other end of the garden, stretched out by the house.

With low, savage growls the beast came bounding down to the wall.

Taos Tom imitated the wail of a cat, and the bull-dog, attracted to the spot by the sound, crouched as though he thought he could by leaping get hold of the intruder.

Calculations had been made upon the dog acting in this fashion, and as the beast, with uplifted head, gave utterance to his savage growls, Taos Tom deftly lassoed him, the noose passing around the dog's neck, and before the astonished brute knew what to make of this strange attack he was dragged off his feet and suspended against the wall, about as helpless for mischief as a dog could well be.

He commenced to yelp, but the tightening of the cord soon put a stop to this, and Taos Tom hauled him up so he could get a look at him, and when he saw the dog had been choked into insensibility, he swung him over to the other side of the wall and lowered him into the alley.

There, old California Joe was ready with a blanket and a cord, and, loosening the lariat around the brute's neck so he would not choke to death, he wrapped him in the blanket, tying the rope around the beast in such a manner that the dog would be perfectly helpless when he recovered his senses.

Meanwhile Taos Tom had dropped from the wall into the garden, and opened the gate—which was fastened by two large bolts—leading into the alley.

The adventurers, bearing the captive brute with them, entered the garden, then carefully closed and fastened the gate after them, so they could not be surprised in the rear.

The dog was deposited in a summer-house, and the intruders advanced, cautiously, to the mansion.

In a room on the ground floor sat the man and woman—husband and wife—who attended to the banker's domestic affairs.

The window curtain was up, and, as the night was warm, the door stood open.

The man was smoking, the woman sewing, and their consternation can be more easily imagined than described, when the Fresh made his appearance, without the slightest warning, and leveled a revolver at them.

"Do not attempt to give an outcry or you will force me to be extremely ugly," he warned.

The servants gazed in helpless astonishment at the speaker, and from him their eyes wandered to the well-armed men grouped just inside the doorway.

"We do not intend to harm you in the least if you will be quiet and do as we say," the Fresh continued.

"We have a little business to transact with your master, and there are certain reasons which make us call upon him in this fashion, but you need not have the slightest fear that we mean to do any harm.

"What is that room there?" and the Fresh pointed to a door in the left-hand wall.

"Our bedroom," replied the woman, who was quicker to recover the use of her tongue than the man.

"I shall have to trouble you to go in there for a while, but do not be afraid; no harm shall be done you."

The two were placed in the bedroom and Pistol Pete assigned to guard them.

Then our hero proceeded to the banker's apartment which was directly back of his place of business.

Upon the table burned a lamp, and beside it was a bottle of wine, a glass, and a plate of crackers, plain evidence that the banker usually indulged in the drink which is popularly termed a "night-cap," before going to bed.

The Fresh carefully examined the apartment. A knob on the wall, like the handle of a bell-pull, attracted his attention.

"Hullo, hullo, what is this?" he murmured.

"Just as likely as not this handle connects by wire with some big bell somewhere, and when it is pulled an alarm will be given sufficient to arouse half the town. I must interfere with this little arrangement."

A few minutes' careful work with his bowie knife severed the wire connected with the knob, and then with a piece of a match he managed to stick the knob against the wall so that it did not look as if it had been tampered with.

Hardly had this job been done when there came the sound of a key in the front door—the banker was coming.

The Fresh dodged into a convenient closet, and a few moments after, the middle-aged German banker, known far and wide as Jacob Weinholdt, entered the room.

He took off and hung up his hat, crossed to the table and sat down; then, just as he reached for the bottle of wine, the Fresh made his appearance.

"Good-evening, Mr. Weinholdt," our hero remarked, just as if it was the commonest thing in the world for a man to enter the private apartment of another at such an untimely hour unannounced.

The banker stood as though his visitor had been a spirit from the other world.

"My goodness!" cried Weinholdt, who spoke English about as well as though he was "native and to the manor born. " "What are you doing here and how did you get in?"

"Oh, that is not material as long as I am in," the Fresh replied, seating himself with perfect coolness.

"I am aware that this is not exactly the time for a business call, but, under the circumstances, it could not be helped, so I hope you will excuse me."

"I have come about that money I deposited with you. I am obliged to quit El Paso rather unexpectedly and I would like the cash, if you please."

"My goodness, man, don't you know that it is as much as your life is worth to come here?" the banker exclaimed.

"The citizens are so excited over that fight this afternoon, that they would string you up to the first tree without mercy if they could get their hands upon you."

And as he spoke the banker in an extremely careless way tilted back his chair against the wall so as to bring his hand within easy reach of the bell-knob.

"Yes, I presume so, but I don't intend to let any of your citizens get their hands upon me, and that is the reason why I have come at this rather unseasonable hour to get my money from you. I want the cash so I can get away, you know."

"But I can't give it to you?"

"Why not?"

"Because my money is all locked up in the safe."

"Unlock it."

"I cannot until eight o'clock in the morning. The safe is fastened with a time-lock and it cannot be opened by any one—not even myself, until the hour for which the combination is set."

This was a check for which our hero was unprovided, and he felt sure too the banker was speaking the truth.

These time-locks, then just being introduced were the greatest protection against robbery that could be well devised for such a wild region.

"That is awkward."

"Give me your address and I will send the money to you," said the banker in his sweetest way.

"Oh, no, that will not do; you might send a detachment of police with the cash."

"You wrong me; I never would betray a customer. I could easily give you into the hands of your enemies now if I chose."

"Oh, no you couldn't!"

"But I could!" the banker persisted, and he laid his hand on the knob.

"This knob here, on which I have my hand, connects with a large bell; one pull and the clang of the bell will wake the town, and if you do not depart I shall be obliged to give the alarm, although I should hate to do it."

"Yes, it would be rough on you, for there would be a dead banker here the moment after."

"But you will not ring any bell for I have cut the wire and the thing will not work."

The banker gave a tug and out came the knob. He grew ashy pale, for he realized that he was in the power of a desperate man.

"You see, my dear Mr. Weinholdt, when I start in to play a game of this kind I generally calculate to commence with all the advantages on my side," the Fresh remarked with icy politeness.

"I am not alone either in this little picnic. Come in, boys," he added, raising his voice a little.

Four of the adventurers filed into the room, the fifth, the Irishman, O'Hare, remained to watch the servants.

Again the face of the banker whitened for he comprehended that he was helpless in the power of desperate men.

"Now then, don't make any mistake!" the Fresh remarked. "We are not robbers, and do not wish to touch a single penny's worth of your valuables, but you have here a good sum of money belonging to me and I want it."

"Come to-morrow and I will gladly pay it."

"You know that I can't come to-morrow."

"To-morrow night then and I will keep the money out of the safe."

"Oh, no, by to-morrow night I must be far away from here; besides, my faith in human nature is not great enough to enable me to believe you will keep my secret."

"No use of protesting about the thing," the

Fresh remarked, perceiving that the banker was about to speak. "I must have my money tonight!"

"I would give it to you in a moment if I could!"

"We must find some way to arrange the matter. By the by, does Doc Moses bank with you?"

"Oh, yes, Doc is one of my best customers."

"We can fix it then. Write out a note for the full amount of my account and sign it, make it payable to bearer. Dave and Pete!"

The two sharps stepped forward.

"These two gentlemen will go with you to Doc Moses. You will take the Doc to one side and explain that you owe this money, but can't get at it on account of the time-lock on your safe, and ask him to oblige you by cashing the note."

"Taos and Buck, you two will go along in the rear of this party, prepared to help your pals out if there should be any row."

"Weinholdt, I don't want to be rough with you, but you must understand right at the beginning that these gentlemen are lightning on the 'draw.' Each man has a gun handy, and at the first sign of treachery on your part, they will plug you for keeps!"

The lips of the banker trembled, but at last he managed to stammer:

"Upon my word of honor, gentlemen, I will deal squarely with you, so don't be too quick."

"Draw out the note—make it ten dollars less than the amount really due, and you can have that for your trouble."

"Now don't be at all worried," the Fresh added, perceiving that the banker could not refrain from trembling.

"There is not the least danger of your being hurt in any way, and no one will know anything about this little affair, if you don't give it away yourself."

"Oh, my goodness, I am not such a fool!" the banker declared.

"The alcalde would be sure to swear that I had something to do with you, and he is a dangerous man to have for an enemy."

"I reckon if I stay round El Paso long I shall have to lay that alcalde out before I get through this district," the Fresh observed, in a tone which betrayed a perfect conviction that he could perform the task without much trouble.

The banker got out his writing materials and proceeded to draw the note.

The Fresh watched him with the eyes of a hawk.

He was debating whether the man could be trusted or not.

There was no doubt in his mind that the banker would have held on to his cash, if he could possibly have done so, and now the question was, had he sufficient pluck to attempt to try any "gum-game" during his visit to Doc Moses's saloon?

The Fresh of Frisco flattered himself that he was a good judge of human nature, and the result of his study of the banker's face was the conviction that Weinholdt was too thoroughly frightened to attempt any underhand work.

"Money is sweet to the man, but life is sweet still," he muttered to himself. "He realizes that he is in a tight place, and he is not going to run any risk of endangering his precious person."

The note being written, the banker signed his name to it with a flourish, for by this time he had in a great measure recovered from his fright.

"Now, then, I am all ready," the banker announced. "and, for heaven's sake, gentlemen, don't be hasty with your weapons."

"I assure you that I will be as square as a die in this matter, and you will not have cause to pull your guns on me."

"Well, I sincerely hope not," the Fresh observed. "I have managed to run into a heap of trouble since coming to El Paso, and I am not anxious for any more."

"I certainly will not do anything to get you into any scrape," the banker declared.

Then, with his body-guard, he departed.

"The only danger now to be feared is that some of the boys may be recognized as having had a hand in the fight this afternoon," the Fresh remarked, as he and California Joe sauntered to the front door—which they held slightly ajar so as to be able to see out into the street.

"Oh, I reckon that isn't much danger of that," the old plainsman replied.

"The thing was all so mixed up, everybody was running up and down like a drove of wild hosses, and the Mexican police were whipped so quickly, that I don't reckon any one of 'em got a good glance at the men who did the shooting."

"If it was you and me now we would be sure to be spotted."

"Oh, yes, no doubt of that."

It was only a few steps from the banker's place to the saloon of Doc Moses, and the pair didn't have long to wait.

Within twenty minutes all of the party were back again, the banker being now in far better spirits, while each of the sports carried a well-filled canvas-bag under his outer garment.

"It is all right—not the least bit of trouble!" Weinholdt exclaimed, as he followed the Fresh to the inner room.

"I rather think Doc mistrusted something out of the common was up, but he's too much of a business man to interfere in matters which do not concern him," he continued.

"Now just give me a receipt for this cash and that winds up the transaction."

Our hero complied with the request, then the banker, who felt jolly now that the peril was all over, insisted that all of the party must take a glass of wine with him.

This ceremony over the adventurers departed.

The banker, who was mystified by the ease with which they had gained entrance to the premises which he imagined to be so well guarded, accompanied them to the back gate.

"What on earth has become of the dog?" he inquired, as he looked around in search of the animal. "I hope, gentlemen that you hav'n't injured him, for I assure you I value the brute very highly."

"Oh, no, we had to capture him and take measures to keep him quiet, for a dog isn't like a human; you can't frighten a beast into silence; a dog will yelp if he dies for it," the Fresh remarked.

"You will find him in the summer-house!" and then the intruders departed, leaving the banker to go the assistance of the dog.

Cautiously the invaders stole through the streets.

Fortune favored them; they succeeded in reaching the old corral without meeting any one who recognized them.

A few minutes more and they were in the saddle, and an hour later their steeds trod on the American side of the Rio Grande.

The expedition had been a most decided success.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE PLOTTERS.

AND now Old Father Time speeds on in his flight, and three months go rapidly by.

During that period nothing of particular importance occurred, concerning any of the characters prominent in our tale.

The Fresh found a ranch for sale on the Rio Grande, only three miles below the Escobedo estate, and struck a bargain for it, settling down into a cattle-raiser.

All the time, though, while apparently attending strictly to his own business, he kept up a quiet though industrious search for the outlaw band who called themselves the Red Riders of Rayon.

His investigations convinced him that the Red Riders, as a band, did not amount to much.

As far as he could discover, they had not operated to any great extent in the country around El Paso, and at last the Fresh came to the opinion that the band consisted of a few reckless El Paso men, who, when they got short of cash, made a raid every now and then.

He discovered some things during his investigation which made him think that his neighbor, Manuel Escobedo, who lived just above the estate owned by the young heiress, might be a member of the outlaw band.

The stage-agent at Las Cruces, who had tried so hard to keep him from going in the stage, was a relative by marriage of Manuel, so also was the driver who "tooled" the stage when it had been stopped by the outlaws, and both of them at one time had been great friends of Manuel.

Now if young Escobedo had any designs upon the heiress, who more likely to aid him than these old-time friends and relatives?

At present, the young man was paying the most desperate siege to the girl, a fact known to all in the neighborhood; but as to whether Margaret looked with a favorable eye or not upon his suit, no one seemed to know.

One thing was certain—he had a strong advocate in the person of his sister, who lost no opportunity to plead her brother's cause.

Judge Bullifant was "on the fence."

In fact, he did not exactly know what to make of the young man.

He had heretofore had a pretty poor opinion of him; but Manuel now seemed to have sown all his wild oats and settled down to a steady rancher, and the old lawyer began to think that after all there might be a good deal of worth in the young man.

The Fresh really took more interest in the heiress of Escobedo than he would have cared to acknowledge, for he was a man who prided himself upon his indifference to the charms of womankind; but there was a fascination about this fresh, young, innocent girl which attracted him, and he found excuse quite often to visit the Escobedo Ranch, but he was never warmly welcomed by any one there, and he could plainly see that there was some powerful influence working against him.

"I suppose they have heard a highly-spiced account of how I skinned the gambling-dens in El Paso, and afterward cleaned out the police," he muttered grimly to himself.

"No doubt the beautiful Margaret looks upon

me as a gambler and desperado of the first water."

"Perhaps one of these days she may have cause to thank the luck which sent me to the banks of the Rio Grande, for when the hour of peril comes—as I feel in my bones it will come to her some day—the desperado will be just the man who will fight to the death for her sake."

And thus affairs went on for another month, the Fresh perceiving that he was less and less welcome at the Escobedo Ranch.

Then Judge Bullifant was called away by business to Valverde.

He was to return in a week, but on the very day that he was expected at the ranch news came that he had been suddenly taken ill and died two hours afterward.

Then came a swarm of lawyers to the Escobedo Ranch to settle up the judge's affairs.

He had died a very wealthy man, and every penny of his fortune he left to Margaret Escobedo.

The Fresh groaned when he heard the news.

"The more money she has, the further off from me it puts her!" he exclaimed.

"Never mind; with all her money she may need a friend one of these days, for the greater her wealth the greater will be the temptation for some scoundrel to make her a prize!"

Six more months went by, winter had come and gone, and the spring grass was beginning to change the color of the vast plains where roamed the ranchers' cattle.

After the death of the old lawyer, Manuel Escobedo, in deference to the grief which the heiress felt for the old gentleman, refrained from pushing his suit so ardently, but now that time had lessened the feeling, he began his attentions again.

Margaret was in a quandary, for she did not know her own feelings.

She liked the young man well enough as a friend, but she was afraid she did not love him well enough to trust all her future happiness into his keeping, and when Isabel pressed her brother's cause with all a sister's ardor, Margaret frankly confessed her doubts.

Isabel laughed at the idea.

"Why, that is the way that all girls feel, of course, before marriage!" she declared.

"After you are married, it will be all right."

But Margaret could not bring herself to consent; there was some secret monitor within which warned her not to wed with the young man, notwithstanding the devotion which he professed. But as she could not give any reason for this feeling, she refrained from revealing, even to Isabel, the true state of her mind, but that young lady was far too shrewd not to guess pretty closely at the truth.

Manuel, on the contrary, was as blind in such matters as men generally are.

Although he was not able to boast that his suit was progressing, yet he believed it was due to the maiden modesty of the heiress, and fancied that some day she would suddenly wake to the truth that she loved him.

At last, though, he began to grow impatient, and sought a consultation with his sister upon the subject.

"Isabel, how much longer do you suppose it will be before this coy beauty makes up her mind to accept me for a lord and master?" the young man asked.

"Upon my word, Manuel, I think the nearest date I can set is the next day after never," the girl replied.

The brows of the young man knitted, and his face grew dark.

"Oh, come, now, it is not a subject to jest upon—it is altogether too important!"

"I assure you that I haven't the least idea of jesting," Isabel answered.

"I am only giving you my honest opinion in as plain words as possible."

"You do not think then that the girl will ever make up her mind to accept me for a husband?"

"No, I do not."

The face of the young man grew darker, and an ugly light shone in his eyes.

"I don't like being played with in this way!" he exclaimed, angrily.

"What does the girl take me for?"

"I can tell you what she does not intend to take you for, and that is a husband," Isabel said, plainly.

"Why doesn't she say no right out then?"

"Well, she has as good as answered in the negative, hasn't she?"

"Yes, I presume she has, but her answer was made in such a manner that it seemed as if she didn't know her own mind, and that if I waited, with time and persuasion, she might be induced to consent."

"Margaret is playing fast and loose with herself," Isabel exclaimed, impatiently.

"I can understand exactly how she feels about the matter, although it is the one subject that she does not like to talk about."

"With everything else she is ready enough to give her opinion, but when I bring up the subject of your passionate devotion, a look of pain appears on her face, and she changes the conversation as soon as possible."

"It is strange, upon my word," Manuel ob-

served, in a thoughtful manner. "And after we planned the scheme so carefully, too. Of course she looks upon me in the light of a preserver, for did I not rescue her from the hands of the outlaws?"

"That is the point exactly!" Isabel cried. "That is the only hold you have on her. I don't suppose your vanity will be flattered if I speak the truth, but it must be spoken, all the same."

"The feeling that there is for you in the heart of Margaret Escobedo is gratitude, not love, although I can see that she is puzzled to distinguish between the two."

"She has a feeling of liking for you, and when you are present, doing your best to be agreeable to her, she honestly tries to persuade herself that she loves you, but the moment you go away and she stops trying to think she is in love with you, indifference succeeds."

"Yes, but if I press my suit warmly, is there not a chance that in one of these moments you speak of, she may be induced to consent to become my wife, and once she pledges herself to the union—after her word is given she will not be apt to break it?" Manuel asked.

"In my judgment such a thing would bring her to understand really how she does feel toward you more quickly than in any other way," Isabel replied, with a disapproving shake of the head.

"You must not judge her as you would an ordinary girl! She has all her mother's firm self-will—stubbornness it might be more properly called."

"Did not her mother forsake a wealthy home, where she had everything she craved, to go off to earn her own living, rather than submit to her husband's whims?"

"True, very true."

"And the daughter is like the mother. If you should succeed, in an unguarded moment, in getting her to consent to become your wife, the moment she was alone and came to think calmly and soberly over the matter, the revulsion would come; she would wake to the truth that she did not love you at all—that the liking she felt for you was gratitude, not love, and the moment that discovery was made, no power on this earth could force her to the altar to give herself to you, no matter if she had given her word a thousand times."

"She is one of the sensible kind of girls," Isabel continued, a sneer upon her beautiful lips. "The girls who consider that it is far better to break a foolishly given promise than to swear to a lie before the altar."

A gloomy look appeared on the face of the young man.

"I believe you are right," he said.

"I know I am right!" she replied. "I have studied this girl as I never studied anybody else in my life, and I am sure that I thoroughly understand her."

"If the affair could be so arranged that the wedding could take place immediately after the promise was given, so that she would not have any time to reflect upon the matter, then there might be some chance for you, but otherwise there isn't the least bit."

"Then, too, do you know, I don't like the presence of this reckless American, this Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco, as he is termed, in the neighborhood?"

"Neither do I, for the fellow is dangerous."

"Yes, dangerous in more ways than one. I can see that he has a high admiration for Margaret, although he is careful not to allow it to be openly seen."

"Oh, yes, I haven't any doubt about it, but, thanks to the tales which we have taken care to repeat to her in regard to him, she understands just what kind of a man he is, a gambling desperado, who, in a civilized community, would not be permitted to pollute the atmosphere with his vile presence."

"Very true, we have done our best to displease the man, but I sometimes think we went a little too far in the matter," the girl remarked, thoughtfully.

"We overdid the thing, and our stories of his wild, desperate and lawless deeds have had a tendency to make Margaret interested in him."

"I can see that she begins to doubt the truth of the stories, as he has lived in the neighborhood for nearly a year now, and has conducted himself in a perfectly proper way."

"Yes, but the fellow is always on the watch, like a hawk," Manuel remarked, a dark look on his handsome face.

"Very true, and a nice squad of fighting men he has with him, too," observed Isabel.

"All selected men, evidently, and it was by their aid that he managed to escape so easily from the hands of the police in El Paso, when we tried to lay him by the heels ten months ago."

"I warned you against that plan, if you remember," the girl remarked.

"I told you at the time that the man was far more dangerous than you deemed him, and that it would not be wise to give him any chance for his life."

"Such men as he are like snakes, unless you trample them into insensibility, right at the beginning, they will be sure to turn and bite you even though wounded to the death."

"Yes, you were nearer right about the matter than the rest of us," Manuel admitted, "but, if you remember, it was the alcalde's plan, and as we had to depend upon him and his brother, Jose, the chief of police, to carry it out, we were obliged to yield to his ideas in the matter."

"Oh, yes, I remember all about it, and I am only sorry that the alcalde himself didn't get damaged in the fight, for it would have been a lesson to him."

"He needs one badly enough; but Jose Parral has cause to curse the day when he encountered this devil of an American; he got a bullet in the leg which will lame him for the rest of his life."

"How comes it that the Parrals have never tried to attack this Jackson Blake here, and revenge themselves upon him?" Isabel demanded, abruptly.

"Oh, they were hot after it at the beginning, but when they sent their spies, and the discovery was made that the American had a regular army at his back, they came to the conclusion that discretion was the better part of valor."

"They were afraid that if they came for wool they might return shorn, eh?" Isabel exclaimed, a smile of contempt curling her red lips.

"That is about the idea."

"But now, Isabel, we must try and settle this matter, for things cannot go on as they are much longer."

"My creditors are getting impatient, particularly that miserable old Jew scoundrel, Hadad Solomons."

"He threatens to have recourse to the law if I do not let him have a good round sum of money soon."

"The miserable old wretch!" cried the girl, angrily. "Think of the vast amount of money that he has made out of you, and through you, during the past ten years."

"That is very true, but the old fellow has done better by me than he would with most men, and you cannot blame him for wanting a settlement, you know."

"I have put him off all this time because he thought I would secure the heiress, but he is beginning to come to the conclusion that I do not stand much chance to win the prize."

"He is quite right—you do not, by *fair* means," observed Isabel, a dark look upon her face, which strangely distorted her handsome features.

"You would urge foul then?" Manuel remarked, returning the look.

"I would! You have gone so far in the matter now that it is not possible for you to retreat. You *must* go on—the girl and her estate *must* be yours!"

"But how can it be worked?"

"Let the Red Riders appear again and capture both of us; have the chief announce that he has determined to marry Margaret, so as to secure her estate; let him tell her that there is a priest ready to perform the ceremony, and then, at the critical moment, you will appear, in the absence of the outlaw, of course."

"You announce that you are risking your life to save her, but as it is impossible for you to help us to escape, the only way to baffle the outlaws will be to get the priest to marry *you* to her; that will defeat the scheme of the outlaw to get possession of the Escobedo estate, and, finding himself baffled, he will be glad to accept a ransom and release us."

"Good! The scheme will work, and we will not lose any time in putting it into execution," Manuel declared.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CARRYING OUT THE PLOT.

As the neighborhood of the Escobedo Ranch was perfectly quiet and peaceable, the two girls were in the habit of taking a ride two or three times a week, unattended, as there was no danger to be apprehended.

And as the afternoon of the day following the one on which the conversation between the brother and sister took place, as recorded in our last chapter, was as fine a one as could be desired, Isabel suggested to Margaret that a ride would be enjoyable.

The heiress was pleased with the idea and the horses were ordered.

After they had gotten well on their way, Isabel deftly turned the conversation to her brother, and gently chided Margaret for inspiring her poor Manuel with such a terrible passion.

Margaret blushed slightly, but not with the air of a girl whose heart was touched, and she pretended to believe that Isabel was jesting.

"Oh, but I am not jesting," the other declared.

"I am in sober earnest if ever a woman was!"

"I tell you that my poor Manuel is just dying for you, and you are awful cruel to keep him in suspense!"

"Oh, I do not think I really know my own feeling about the matter!" Margaret exclaimed.

"I think a great deal of your brother and I would gladly make you my sister in reality, but, somehow, it seems to me that I do not like him as a girl should like a man to whom she intrusts the happiness of her whole life."

"Oh, I feel sure you would after you were once married to him, you know," Isabel declared in her most persuasive way.

Margaret shook her head.

"I think that a girl ought to be sure of her own mind before she takes such an important step as that!" she declared.

"Think how terrible it would be for her if she should make a mistake about the matter, for after the marriage once takes place there is no retreating."

"Yes, that is very true; I suppose you are wise to be so careful about the matter," Isabel observed with a smile, yet in her heart she was terribly enraged at the other's obstinacy.

Just at this point they came in view of the ranch of Jackson Blake, some distance away, but still plainly visible.

After coming in sight of the ranch Isabel stole a look at the face of her companion and noticed that there was a strange expression on her face, as she gazed in the direction of the ranch.

A sudden fear shot through the heart of the scheming Mexican beauty.

Was it possible that the heiress of Escobedo took more than an interest in this American desperado?

She determined to satisfy herself on this point.

"I see you are noticing the ranch of this Mr. Jackson Blake," she observed.

"I think it is a very strange fact that the inhabitants of this section should permit such a fellow to take up his abode here, the miserable scoundrel! He should be driven away!"

A slight tinge of color appeared on Margaret's face, and a peculiar light shone in her large eyes.

"Are you not speaking rather harshly, Isabel?" she asked.

"No, I think not—not any more harshly than the subject deserves."

"But since the gentleman has lived here I am not aware that he has misconducted himself in any way."

This defense of the man whom she hated so bitterly, angered the Mexican beauty, but she had self-control enough not to allow her companion to perceive it.

"Oh, I suppose since he has lived here he has been on his good behavior; probably afraid that he will not be allowed to remain if he does not behave himself, but that he has been a most miserable scoundrel there is not the least doubt."

Isabel spoke hotly, despite her desire not to show she hated the man.

"Yes, if one could believe all the stories that one told of him he must be a pretty bad man," Margaret replied.

"When he first came here I remember Judge Bullifant was much afraid he would make trouble, particularly when it was discovered that he was accompanied by seven men, all reputed to be desperate characters, but, as time passed on, and Mr. Blake attended strictly to his own business, the judge finally came to the conclusion he was not so black as he had been painted, and I certainly think the judge was right."

"I suppose he has led a fast life in his time, gambled and fought, as about all the men around here seem to do, but now he doesn't appear to be any the worse for it."

Isabel took Margaret's remark in regard to the habits of the men on the frontier to be a slight dig at her brother, Manuel, and she was quick to resent it.

"I suppose you are hinting at the stories circulated about Manuel," she observed, "and though I am willing to admit that he was a little wild, yet he never was the brawling desperado that this Fresh of Frisco has been."

"Good gracious, Isabel!" Margaret exclaimed, good-naturedly, "how on earth do you know anything about the man?"

"Well, of course, I know nothing beyond what I have heard," the other was obliged to admit.

"You cannot always believe all you hear, you know, and as far as this gentleman is concerned I feel satisfied that he has been shamefully lied."

Margaret spoke with some little heat, and Isabel judged that it would be wise to change the subject.

She had satisfied herself.

Margaret was taking a great interest in the dashing American; the very stories told of his wild exploits had piqued her curiosity, leading her to look upon him as being somewhat superior to the common herd.

"She is interested enough in him to defend his character when it is assailed," Isabel thought.

"From interest to love is but a step which she may take at any time, almost without knowing it."

"It is well that we have decided to secure her, and that right speedily!"

Isabel had announced that she was in the humor for a long ride, and Margaret was nothing loth.

So the crafty Mexican beauty, acting the guide, took an extremely roundabout way,

then she pretended that she did not know exactly where she was, and much time was consumed in endeavoring to get on the right trail, and when the dusky shades of night began to gather on the earth the pair were a good distance from the Escobedo Ranch.

Margaret began to be alarmed.

"Are you sure that you are in the right path now?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, no doubt about it," the other answered, confidently.

"But see! there is a ranch ahead and we can inquire there."

Margaret regarded this as a good idea and said as much.

When the pair approached the ranch there was something about the place which seemed familiar to the heiress of Escobedo.

"It appears to me as if I had visited this place before," she said.

The girls had halted their horses at the gate, and sat motionless, surveying their surroundings in the gathering gloom.

"Yes, it certainly seems to me as if I had been here before, and yet the place looks strange to me too."

"It looks as if it was deserted."

"So it does!"

Then a wild look of fright came over Isabel's face and she grasped her companion by the arm.

"Oh, Heaven!" she cried in a hoarse whisper, "it is that lonely ranch to which we were taken by the Red Riders, and from which Manuel, my brother, saved us."

"It is, it is!" responded Margaret, her face growing pale.

"Let us turn and ride for our lives!"

"It is too late!" cried Isabel, despairingly.

The cry was forced from her lips by the gate opening suddenly, showing four of the disguised outlaws, the terrible Red Riders of Rayon, who rushed forward with drawn revolvers and surrounded the helpless girls.

"Good enough!" cried the outlaw chief, who led the advance, "you have come just in time, for I was going after you to-morrow, or the next day, as I have got tired of waiting. We ought to have been married ten months ago, but it is better late than never!"

Margaret's heart sunk, for this time there did not seem to be any chance that she would succeed in escaping from the trap into which she had fallen.

"You succeeded in slipping through my fingers the last time on account of one of my men getting drunk and making a fool of himself, but you will not have any such luck this time, I can tell you."

The captives were conducted to the self-same apartment where they had been confined on the previous occasion.

And after they were safely in the room the outlaw chief made known his plans.

"A young slip of a girl like you has no business with so much money, and you need a husband to take care of it for you," he announced.

"Now, I am just the man for you, and you can bet your life I am a pretty good-looking fellow when I get this disguise off!"

"Everything is all arranged for the ceremony," he continued.

"It is going to be a regular legal marriage you know and no mistake, for, otherwise, I will not have any claims to your estate."

"I have a priest all ready—he is rather addicted to liquor and has been 'silenced,' and forced to leave Mexico, but he is a priest all the same and a marriage performed by him will be just as legal in the eyes of the law as though we were married by the archbishop himself in the cathedral in the city of Mexico."

"Now, in order to set your mind at rest about the man, I will send him in so he can prove to you that he is what he represents himself to be, and after you are satisfied—I'll give an hour to get ready—I will return and we will be made man and wife."

Then the outlaw departed, leaving poor Margaret almost speechless with terror.

"Rouse yourself, Margaret!" cried Isabel, "and let us see if we cannot escape from this terrible trap."

There was a grated window in the room, and Isabel hurried to it.

The bars were old and rusty, and after severe exertion the girl succeeded in removing two of them, and then the face of Manuel appeared in the opening.

The girls gave a joyous exclamation.

"Do not raise an alarm, and I may be able to save you!" the young man said, as he clambered through the window.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A SURPRISE.

BRIEFLY to her brother Isabel explained the situation.

"I hardly know what to do," Manuel said. "I grew alarmed when you did not return, and went out to seek you. I found your trail and followed it here; then, remembering what had happened in this ranch before, I guessed that you had again fallen into the power of the Red Riders, and it was at the risk of my life that I

evaded the outlaws, who are on the watch, and gained this window."

"Can we not escape through it?" his sister asked.

"Impossible, the guards without would surely detect us."

"What is to be done?" cried Margaret, wringing her hands in agony.

"I have it!" exclaimed Isabel, "a trick to defeat the plans of this outlaw! All he wants to marry you for is to get a claim on your estate. If you were already married, he could not succeed in his scheme, and would be glad to release you on condition of your paying a good ransom."

"Let Manuel conceal himself, and then, when the priest enters, force him by threats to perform the marriage ceremony between you, Margaret and Manuel."

"I will be a witness and, of course, it will be as binding in the eyes of the law as though performed in the presence of all the world. Then, Manuel can escape through the window, and when the outlaw comes to seek his bride he will be woefully disappointed!"

"The scheme is an excellent one and will surely succeed!" Manuel declared.

"I have loved you long, Margaret, and have earnestly tried to win you, and believe me, though a wedding such as this I never even dreamed of, yet still to me it will be as sacred as the most elaborate ceremony."

"Oh, heavens, what shall I do?" exclaimed the heiress of Escobedo, almost distracted.

"Oh, Manuel, I do not feel that I love you as a wife should love her husband, and such a marriage as this is only a mockery."

"It is but to save you from this villainous outlaw," Isabel whispered in her ear. "It will be but an empty ceremony, for Manuel will be too proud to claim you, if you do not desire him for a husband after you are released from this den."

"Oh, is there no other way to escape?"

"Alas, I fear not, and I am risking my life by striving to save you by this trick," the young man exclaimed, earnestly.

"Be it so, I will trust to your honor to treat me justly in the future," Margaret replied, pale as death.

"You make me blessed beyond expression!"

The key grated in the lock.

"Aba! there is the priest!" Manuel exclaimed, his face bright with triumph.

"By standing in this corner he will not perceive me until he is fairly in the room, and the door locked behind him."

"Then, by the aid of my revolver, I will force him to do my bidding!"

Manuel hurried into the corner.

The door opened and into the room came four men instead of one, and the leader of the party was Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco!

The brother and sister stared as if the intruders had been white-sheeted specters from the tomb; but Margaret, with a scream of joy, rushed to the Fresh.

"Oh, heavens! I am saved!" she cried, and but for his supporting arm, she would have fallen, weak with joy.

"Yes, I am just in time to interfere in this little picnic," the Fresh observed.

"I have got you where your hair is short, young man, this time!" he declared, addressing Manuel, who was fingering his revolver as though he meditated a struggle, but as the invaded party had their weapons out, ready cocked for action, he restrained the impulse.

"We have your three Red Riders all right and you are nabbed too, the boss of the gang!" the Fresh announced.

Margaret could hardly believe she heard aright.

"What do you mean? Has my cousin, Manuel, aught to do with these outlaws?" she cried.

"Why, he is the chief of the band!" the Fresh answered. "I have had my eyes on him for ten months, and my men have watched him by day and night. I knew he was up to some game and I made up my mind to spoil it."

"Oh heavens, I understand the plot now!" the girl exclaimed. "It is true—you two whom I would have done almost anything for—have conspired to wreck all my life!"

"You are an intruder who has taken the money which rightly belongs to us and ought to be crushed like a venomous snake!" cried Isabel, fiercely.

"Let them go! I make no charges against them," Margaret cried.

"Let them seek repentance afar."

"You can dust!" said the Fresh, tersely. "But take my advice and don't stay in this section of country, for I am not satisfied, if this lady is—vamose!"

The brother and sister departed, and, with their companions, hastened to seek refuge on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande.

The Red Riders of Rayon were dispersed.

Our tale is told.

Jackson Blake, still lingers by the banks of the "Brave River of the North," and rumor says that soon Margaret, the heiress of Escobedo, will become the wife of the Fresh of 'Frisco.

THE END.

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